Spring 5-17-2019

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF BLACK UPPER MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL WRITING

April L. Poindexter
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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF BLACK UPPER MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL WRITING, by APRIL L. POINDEXTER, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF BLACK UPPER MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL WRITING

by

APRIL L. POINDEXTER

Under the Direction of Dr. Michelle Zoss

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, I explored the school writing experiences of four Black upper middle-class children in elementary school and their beliefs about school writing. Participants included three girls and one boy. All students were in fourth or fifth grade and attended three public schools in a metropolitan area in the Southeast region of the U.S. I drew on critical race theory to center the experiences of people of color within systems of privilege or oppression (Bell 1992, 1995; Crenshaw 1988, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano, 1997, 1998) such as the education system. I also used sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) to examine aspects of culture, class, and lived experiences. Within this framework, I situated the experiences of Black upper middle-class children in broad, systemic contexts, as well as personal, environmental, and cultural understandings. Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing also provided a framework to anchor the varied discourses on writing children commonly take up and embrace. My work aimed to listen

to and honor the voices of the young Black girls and boys in the study, thus I used a narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin, 2013). I used a narrative analysis approach (Riessman, 2008) to analyze the data and represent the findings in narrative constellations. Findings showed that all four students 1) placed importance on technical writing skills, 2) experienced highly structured writing assignments, 3) felt teachers avoided critical and sociopolitical issues in class and in writing opportunities, and 4) experienced a silencing and invisibility of their Black identities in school. The implications call attention to the hidden messaging Black upper middle-class children receive that writing about and discussing race is negative or offensive. Thus, educators may be more intentional about fostering professional development for teachers on bias and how to foster dialogue and writing about race in a safe way for all students. Secondly, there is a need for education policy makers and curriculum writers to produce innovative resources to aid teachers in bringing critical and sociopolitical topics into the classroom, as well as creating a school space that affirms ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

INDEX WORDS: Black Upper Middle-Class, Elementary Students, Children, School Writing, Student Writing, Writing Instruction, Writing Attitudes, Student Voice, Narrative Inquiry, Sociocultural Theory, Critical Race Theory, Discourses of Writing, Intersectionality, Narrative Constellations

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A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Teaching and Learning

in

the Department of Middle and Secondary Education

in

the College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2019

DEDICATION

To Reece, Londyn, and Camden. May you dream big and persevere. Be inspired by all the world has to offer you, and all that you have to offer the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Jesus for granting me the strength and endurance to complete this journey. You poured into me thousands of words over hundreds of pages when I sat before a blank screen with doubts, worries, and fears. Thank you for the grace and mercy you give me every day and for seeing me through one of the most difficult things I've ever done. Glory be to You!

Sometimes God has a way of positioning people in your life at just the right time or in just the right way. They offer you the very thing your heart and soul need. For that, I must acknowledge the following people: *My core (mom, Alison Gardner; sister, Angela Scott; and daughter, Reece Poindexter)* for your endless stream of encouragement. For listening to all of my complaints and frustrations and celebrating the milestones along the way. For your genuine interest in every step of my process and for being my biggest cheerleaders in life. Thank you, Reece for being the sweetest smile on long, hard days. For a tender hand on my cheek that somehow seemed to say, "I love you mommy. Keep going." *My husband, Raymond Poindexter* for your immense patience through a difficult and trying process. *My dad, David Gardner* for always seeing the glass half full during my moments of panic and stress, and for your endless admiration of me.

My advisor, Dr. Michelle Zoss for being a steady and calm presence. For guiding me and supporting me at every turn. Thank you for your intentionality in fostering an atmosphere of connection, celebration, and kindness. *My committee, Dr. Nadia Behizadeh, Dr. LaToya Owens, and Dr. Jennifer Esposito* for your steadfast support and pushing me in my thinking. *Dr. Gertrude Tinker Sachs* for inspiring and challenging me.

My cousin, Trey Gardner for planting a seed to pursue a PhD after our late-night conversations sharing future aspirations and our plans to take over the world. *Dr. Sarah Klein* for being a friend in a world that was intimidating and unfamiliar. For your honesty and humor

which were refreshing and motivating. *Dr. Darcel Harper-Hogans* for going first and turning around to extend a hand to help lift me up too. *Jason Marshall & Joan Ray,* for examples of exceptional leadership. For making me see myself differently because of your belief and confidence in me. To the circle of family and friends who supported me along the way – thank you.

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OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Approaches to Writing Instruction – The collective body of pedagogies, practices, and beliefs that frame the teaching of writing (McCarthey & Ro, 2011).

Black Upper Middle Class – An identity that reflects a combination of socioeconomic status and members of the Black race who 1) come from families where one or both parents are college-educated, 2) one or both parents work in a professional capacity, 3) one or both parents together earn an income that reflects approximately three to four times the median annual income for the state, and 4) lives in an affluent neighborhood zoned for a reputable public school.

Discourses of Writing – The body of beliefs, knowledge, and understandings that teachers and children take up and embrace with regard to the teaching and learning of writing (Ivanic, 2004).

School Writing – The combination of writing instruction, writing strategies, writing activities/assignments students receive from their teachers, and the writing students compose for academic purposes. This includes the writing environment and the length of time students spend engaged in writing instruction or writing activities in school (Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012).

Intersectionality – The overlap between two identities such as Blackness and middle-classness.

Student Voice – The body of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and opinions students produce and express as they "participate in meaningful decision-making and dialogue regarding their learning environment and classroom climate for the purposes of building upon foundations of community and trust" (Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011, p. 55); Children verbalizing, sharing, and reflecting upon their personal stories and experiences with writing. This can be represented in student writing and participation in research.

Writers Workshop – A writing model frequently used in classrooms in which the writing process is taught to children through a combination of repeated writing experiences such as:

daily, brief, explicit lessons on writing, independent writing time, peer-conferences, teacher-student conferences, and sharing and publishing writing. Students are encouraged to embrace writing and build a writer's identity, tell personal stories, and write across a variety of genres. (Calkins, 2014).

Writing Process – Theoretical and instructional approach in which writing is viewed as both a sequential and recursive process that occurs in stages such as "planning; drafting; sharing; revising; editing; evaluating; and, for some writing pieces, publishing" (Graham, Bollinger, Olson, D'Aoust, MacArthur, McCutchen, & Olinghouse, 2012, p. 7).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My earliest memories of writing come in the form of learning how to draw a circle at the dining room table with my mom and dad. Amidst an endless supply of construction paper and crayons, came the excitement of finally being able to draw lopsided hearts and crooked stars. Soon after that came the fierce spirit of independence in learning to write *A-p-r-i-l* in a charming blend of backwards and misplaced capital letters. I can recall my parents patiently sitting with me and the guidance and encouragement they provided. The sense of accomplishment I felt at creating something that had meaning to others was powerful! These memories are scattered across a childhood that was filled with book reports, library visits, secret diaries, and hand-written notes to friends. I was immersed in a world of literacy from an early age. As a result, my parents helped to cultivate within me a love of reading and a certain comfort level and appreciation of writing. I recognize that my pathways through schooling and education were made easier because of these foundational supports and feel fortunate that these were my early literacy experiences.

When I think about my own elementary writing experiences, I hold very positive views. Throughout elementary and middle school, I enjoyed keeping journals and writing poetry. Writing offered a way to play with words and language and sort out feelings. There were plenty of opportunities and activities in the classroom that stirred excitement in me. My third-grade teacher set up writing centers that included special stationery to write letters to our classmates along with a mailbox system. I loved these experiences. My fourth-grade teacher guided our class in creating a “class cookbook” in which each student selected a special family recipe and wrote about why that dish was special for their family. I remember browsing through the

cookbook countless times and reading the family stories and cultural traditions of my friends with great interest. Although peer-editing in red pens, cursive instruction, and grammar sheets were part of my regular writing instruction, writing in school was purposeful and meaningful to me. In fact, I still have my purple composition morning journal from 5th grade. My teacher often took time to write back to us in our journals. I felt very special knowing she had taken the time to read my thoughts and stories, and even more so that she had taken time to share some of her personal thoughts and stories with me. Early on, I saw writing as a way to express myself and learn who others are; that identity was projected through writing.

As an upper-elementary teacher for ten years, teaching writing was something I was most passionate about. I believed that each child had something to say; that every student had a unique perspective to offer, and I wanted to create the same kind of school writing experiences I had for my own students. This passion was compounded by my perspective that writing was the crux of schooling, higher education, and future career opportunities. I thought that if students were to successfully negotiate these worlds, the ability to communicate effectively through writing was critical. As a teacher, my goal was for students to embrace writing as a means to express, explore, and construct meaning in their worlds.

Over the years I explored different approaches to teaching writing. I conferenced regularly with my students to provide feedback and guided them through the writing process. I issued book reports, dutifully taught the 5-paragraph essay structure, and passionately delved into a poetry unit each year. I used modeling, mini lessons, peer, and mentor texts to help students craft their writing. I invested time in writing activities that went beyond the basic standards. My favorite part of the year was the Author Project. Each student compiled their favorite pieces of school writing into a hardback "published" book and shared their writing with

peers and parents. I loved seeing the joy on the students' faces and the amazement they expressed at being accomplished writers. It was important to me that students viewed their writing as a worthy keepsake and a reflection of themselves. I like to think I was a good writing teacher, but there is some romanticism bound in my recollections. I believe my early writing instruction lacked the voice of my students. It wasn't until I entered my Ph.D. program to study language and literacy that I experienced a critical shift in my thinking about the teaching and learning of writing. Here, I became more purposeful about sociopolitical writing and writing for social justice.

In the beginning of my program, I was interested in several aspects of school writing. I read research concerning critical literacy, writing instruction, writing assessment, teacher education, and student perceptions of school writing. I began to notice a disturbing trend concerning students of color. Education research disproportionately focused on Black children from low-income families. Black students in literacy studies were often described as poor, low-income, low-achieving, at-risk, or disadvantaged. If research routinely positions Black children in such limited ways, deficit views of Black children can be perpetuated. Patterns in the existing research led me to conclude that a gap exists in researching the full spectrum of Black families. Specifically, there is a need for studies to focus on Black upper middle-class and middle-class children to understand their schooling experiences as well.

Additionally, I found that more literature exists on teachers' perspectives on writing instruction, than that of their students. The notion of students' voice being less privileged and less important than teachers also played a role in the development of my study. Thus, I learned that the school writing experiences of Black middle-class students are not well represented; their

opinions are not requested, their voices are not heard, and their stories are not told. It is from this understanding that I approach my research.

Background of Study

There are a myriad of factors that influence school writing experiences for children. It is necessary then to explore school writing in terms of elementary school foundations, expectations and demands placed upon children, education reform, standardized testing, and culture and the role these factors play in how children experience writing and beliefs toward writing.

Elementary Writing as a Foundation

Research shows that children's positive attitudes toward writing typically decline as they get older (Nistler, 1990). Whether it's a teacher's poor pedagogical knowledge (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), the type of writing instruction they provide (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Bradley, 2001), academic demands versus student motivation (McCaslin, 2006; Turner & Paris, 1995), or curriculum programs and policies (Freedman, 1994), there is something amiss in the teaching and learning of writing for children in the United States. Indeed, by the time U.S. students are in fourth grade, two out of three of do not meet school writing demands (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003). It is not surprising then that nearly 50% of students are not prepared to write at a collegiate level as they leave high school (Achieve, Inc., 2005; Cutler & Graham, 2008; National Commission on Writing, 2003). Students should be adequately prepared to meet the demands of college-level writing, which goes beyond formulas and mechanics. As students enter the workforce, the ability to write well is a marketable and sought-after skill in professional fields (National Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005).

However, writing is not simply a skill that children learn so they can use it in the far-off future. Writing immediately affords children opportunities to become learners, explorers, and

meaning-makers (Clay, 1975; Dyson, 1993; Pennington, 2014). Writing develops cognitive processes such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Langer & Applebee, 2007). Through writing children learn about themselves, the world, and gain a deeper understanding of academic content (Klein, Acron, & Baker, 2016; Knipper & Duggan, 2006; Pennington, 2014). Writing offers a tool for children to actively participate in social change and democratic influence (Dyson, 1992). Even young children can use writing to participate in sociopolitical issues and effect change in their lives (Kuby, 2013; Vasquez, 2001a; 2001b). Elementary writing experiences are therefore critical. They provide the foundation for writing development in children's writing abilities (Richards, et. al, 2012; Turbill & Bean, 2006), and great attention should be placed on elementary writing.

School Writing Expectations

School writing experiences for children can be rewarding or alienating and vulnerable. Writing is a highly complex task for children. "It involves integrating multiple physical and cognitive demands, including transcription, spelling, sentence formation, idea generation, and organization, and an understanding of audience, purpose, and genre" (McQuitty, 2014, p. 468). Children are asked to draw on many cognitive and physical processes at once, which can make writing challenging and arduous at times. Richards, Sturm, and Cali (2012) identified 22 "writing activities" (i.e., write independently, brainstorm vocabulary, revise/edit, outline, research, write journals, publish final draft) (p. 135) and nearly 30 different "writing types" (i.e., complete worksheets, practice handwriting, write personal stories, write memoirs, write letters, write book reports, write research reports, write plays) (p. 137) that could potentially take place in an elementary classroom. School writing is further complicated by the type of writing instruction the students receive, the writing environment, and the writing assignments/activities the students

are asked to complete (Richards, et. al, 2012). For example, teachers often place much of their focus on mechanics and conventions (Cutler & Graham, 2008). It is not surprising that children then also place a high value on skills-based writing, where mechanics, grammar, spelling, and conventions are the focus (Lambirth, 2016). Graham (1982) asserts that when children focus heavily on mechanics, the natural flow of writing becomes disrupted and constricted and children's self-confidence in their writing abilities diminishes.

There is also vulnerability and risk associated with school writing because of cultural ideals and societal values that surround academic writing (see Jones Royster, 1996/2011). Pennington (2014) asserts that children commonly understand writing as "an imposed, least-favorite activity required by the school system and posing a threat to their competence and confidence" (p. 444). Supporting this claim, Pollard (1990) found that students' enjoyment level of a task is related to the risk involved. Therefore, if students view writing as a high-risk activity, they may be less likely to enjoy the act of writing. Understanding children's perceptions of school writing is important because elementary writing experiences set the tone for how children may experience and interpret writing well into their adult lives.

Influence of Education Reform on Writing

Over the past two decades, U.S. education policy has spurred two major school reform efforts: No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2009) which promoted the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) made reading and math top academic priorities. It also introduced a wave of high-stakes, standardized tests that typically did not require students to compose a text. A residual side effect of this reform was that writing instruction fell by the wayside so that teachers could dedicate more classroom time to

content areas that students would be tested on (Hillocks, 2002), or writing instruction became narrowed and prescribed to conform to the style of the state assessments (McCarthey, 2008).

In 2009, as part of the Race to the Top (RTTT) education initiative, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were introduced to provide the same set of rigorous academic standards for children across the United States. The importance of writing was once again highlighted and made a top academic priority. Writing standards were revised to include a focus on college and career readiness and the writing skills necessary for students to successfully compete in a global market (Coleman & Pimental, 2012; Pearson & Heibert, 2013). More state assessments began to include sections that required students to compose written responses (Pearson & Heibert, 2013).

In a national study on the writing instruction of middle schools across the U.S., Applebee and Langer (2011) found that increased attention to writing sometimes led teachers to invest more time on writing instruction in their classrooms. Yet Applebee and Langer also noted the low-level cognitive demands of the writing activities, such as, paragraph length assignments, fill-in-the-blank, copying, and note-taking. In other words, they labeled this work "writing without composing" (p. 15). Writing without composing requires little thought and involves little-to-no application of critical thinking, personal reflection, or active engagement in problem-solving. It is also problematic because a generic voice emerges, rather than that of a complex and unique individual with their own identity.

It is important to note that when Applebee and Langer (2011) did observe extended writing, it often reflected the format of standardized tests. Newkirk and Kittle (2013) caution the academic community on prescribed, formulaic writing that stringently aligns with a writing rubric. This kind of writing is likely not what college professors and employers seek. Rather, writing that showcases the writer's ability to think critically, analytically, and creatively, and

clearly communicate thoughts and ideas to a wide array of audiences is most valued (National Writing Commission, 2004).

Standardized Assessments and Writing

In the most recent Nation's Report Card on writing assessment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), 24% of the 24,100 eighth grade students and 24% of the 28,100 twelfth grade students scored at the "proficient" level. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) describes a proficient score as representing "solid academic performance," and states that "Students reaching this level have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter." (p. 7). Only 3% of students performed at the advanced level. The data suggest that the majority of students assessed were writing at a "basic" or "below basic" level, indicating "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade" or less (p. 7). In other words, most of the children struggled to meet the minimum demands of the writing assessment

Furthermore, the report highlights an opportunity gap between poor and middle-class students, as well as students of color and their White peers. Such national writing assessments project students of color as struggling or academically behind, but ignore educational and social systems of inequity. Instead they perpetuate a stigma and a blame-culture on marginalized students. DeMarrais and LeCompt (1999) argue such assessments are more accurately "reflectors of dominant cultural capital than they are of ability or intelligence" (p. 275). Additionally, the Common Core State Standards (2010), which continue to influence much of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in classrooms today are also decried by critics for a lack of attention to ethnically diverse and minority students (Denham, 2015; McCaffrey & McCaffrey, 2017; Wiley & Rolstad, 2014; Woodard & Kline, 2016).

Standardized writing assessments determine whether students are competent and effective writers based upon one measure, one standard, and a test design that reflects a White, monolingual, middle-class culture (Howard, 2010). Conversely, national reports that highlight deficiencies do not address the successes of marginalized and historically underserved students that occur daily in the classroom with highly effective and culturally competent teachers. Howard problematizes traditional performance measures by highlighting the talents, skills, and funds of knowledge students do bring to their K-12 schools that are often ignored. He argues that standardized measures do not acknowledge "leadership skills, creative and artistic ability, initiative in analyzing tasks, risk taking, persuasive speaking, consensus building, resiliency, and emotional maturity" (p.13). In other words, such measures attempt to narrowly quantify individual writing skills and abilities, which can create misleading data.

Culture and Literacy

People who embrace sociocultural theories look beyond standardized test scores to consider children as individuals in which their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences influence their writing performance and academic writing experiences. There are a host of outside factors that shape and influence a student's learning process and development. One example of this is that schools do not recognize or value the literacy practices from marginalized cultures (Ball & Lardner, 2005; Heath, 1983). Students are expected to conform to dominant and privileged ways of *doing* literacy (Gregory & Williams, 2000; Heath, 1983). Research shows documented patterns of teachers who approach their minority or low-income students with deficit beliefs and attitudes; they do not see these diverse students as having the same potential or intelligence as White, middle-class students (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018; Howard, 2010; King, 1991; Rist, 1970). For instance, it is not uncommon for White teachers to make claims of cheating or

plagiarism when Black students turn in well-written and articulate papers (Allen, 2010; C. Gordon, personal communication, August 29, 2017). Teachers may also experience a decline in their confidence and belief that they can effectively teach Black students (Ball & Lardner, 2005).

Today, sociocultural theories undergird new meanings of literacy. No longer is literacy confined to a set of reading, writing, and oral communication skills used to express ideas (Gover & Engelert, 1998). Instead literacy has come to be understood by scholars and researchers in the field as a fluid embodiment of local and global practices, multimodalities, and a range of sociocultural influences that acknowledge systems of power, politics, and access (Perry, 2012). There are many ways to define literacy. Cushman, Barbier, Mazack, and Petrone (2006) argue that literacy "is best understood as it was situated in events, practices, patterns of behavior, and ultimately socioeconomic structures" (p.190), while Szved (2001) describes "five elements of literacy- text, context, function, participants, and motivation" (p. 423). Both views of literacy are inclusive of communication, language, speech, reading, writing, print, and meaning-making within social contexts.

Cultural diversity and economic backgrounds shape the act of literacy itself (Gover & Engelert, 1998; Street, 1984). The idea of literacy then, has developed into *literacies*, affording new opportunities for meaning-making and communicating. Family and community literacies exist, marking distinct differences in literacy events and practices among culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse populations (Chapman, 2006; Cushman, et. al, 2006). While an awareness of sociocultural influences and diverse literacies does not always translate to school practice (Cushman, et. al, 2006), sociocultural learning theories do provide a framework to examine the contexts of individual writing experiences in ways that move beyond surface-level statistics (Prior, 2006).

Together, factors such as school writing expectations, elementary writing as a foundation, education reforms, standardized assessments, and culture and literacy all contribute to how a student comes to understand school writing. These factors can influence student's development as writers and shape their experiences and beliefs toward writing. Students are often positioned as receivers of larger ideological beliefs and discourses; they are receivers of a teacher's choice of instruction, schooling practices, and educational policy (Newkirk & Kittle, 2013). This positioning calls for an examination of the contexts in which marginalized and invisible students participate.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how four Black upper middle-class children experience school writing. The study focuses on fourth and fifth grade students who attend three different public schools in the Southeastern metropolitan region. The schools vary somewhat in terms of racial and socioeconomic demographics, but share several commonalities such as positive reputation, affluent settings, and high-performance scores. I am seeking to understand the writing experiences of the participants, the beliefs that are shaped within their spaces, and how the roles of culture, school setting, and the broader education system relate to these experiences. Because my research focused on the students' experiences and beliefs, much of my data draws from interviews with the children, rather than my personal observations and analysis of their writing instruction. This allowed me to better understand children's experience with school writing. The language they used to speak about writing, their voice, tone, and expression, all helped to convey personal feelings and beliefs toward school writing. Given the school setting as a racialized space, and the role that race and class play in the educative school experiences

students have, I used critical race theory and sociocultural theory of learning as theoretical perspectives to understand the writing experiences for children in the classroom.

First, my study draws on critical race theory. Critical race theory examines themes of race and power within social systems that create, perpetuate, and/or maintain inequitable, unjust, and oppressive experiences for marginalized persons. Critical race theory can be used to explore why children in middle-class school settings are often exposed to high-quality writing instruction that goes beyond preparing for state tests, while children in low-income school settings often receive instruction geared toward meeting basic test standards (McCarthey, 2008), or why Black children's academic instruction is often inferior to that of White students (Booker Baker, 2005).

Sociocultural theory of learning is a broad theoretical perspective that undergirds this qualitative research study. Rogoff, Radziszewska, and Masiello (1995) purport that "sociocultural perspectives assert that individual developmental processes are inherently involved with the actual activities in which children engage with others in cultural practices and institutions, and that variation is inherent to human functioning" (p. 126). Children are individual human beings who bring their own qualities, characteristics, identity, and ways of being to their experiences in school. It is irrational to expect otherwise. What undergirds sociocultural theory of learning, then, is the phenomena of cognitive development within an individual and how it is shaped by the mediated interactions within those social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986; Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning positions social interactions as significant influences on cognitive growth and childhood development. In terms of elementary-age children learning to write, it is important to consider the ways in which families use literacy in their lives. The opportunity and exposure to literacy learning both in school and at home effect the cognitive skills and knowledge base children are afforded as a writing

foundation. In turn these are the core skills and opportunities children build upon as they become adults (Brandt, 2001).

In keeping with a qualitative paradigm and theoretical frameworks that emphasize the contextual and narrative elements of K-12 research, this study employs Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry methodology. Clandinin (2013) argues that narrative inquiry does not simply consist of a researcher listening to others tell their story, writing it down, and then retelling it. Instead key concepts such as "living, telling, retelling, and reliving" are identified as processes that should occur in conducting a narrative inquiry (p. 34). Living and telling involve the participants living out their lives and telling stories about it. Retelling is "coming alongside the participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories" (p. 34). It is in this process that researchers may begin to retell their own lived stories shaped by the participants' story. Lastly, reliving involves living life in a way that honors and carries the stories a researcher has gained through a narrative inquiry.

This understanding of narrative inquiry also speaks to a humanizing approach (Paris & Winn, 2014) in which researchers embrace democratic and inclusive ideals that value care (Noddings, 1993) and listening (Bakhtin, 1975/1981) with their participants. With these methodological frameworks, I aim to highlight and amplify Black upper middle-class children's voices and privilege their stories as a vital part of teaching and learning. As an educator and a researcher coming alongside these students, I expect that my own practices as an educator and views of school writing as a woman of color will be shaped and informed by this inquiry into the participants experiences and beliefs views on school writing. My goal in pursuing this research is to bring awareness to the significance and value of the student voice as a way for teachers and researchers to mediate a deeper understanding of what Black children learn about school writing.

The participants consisted of four elementary students in fourth and fifth grade who came from families who identified as both Black and middle-class, or upper-middle class. For the purposes of this study, a middle-class/upper-middle class status is based upon the following social status measures: parental education, parental occupation, parental income, and home values of neighborhood. Each participant had these sociocultural factors in common so that I could gain deeper insight into how Black upper middle-class children experience school writing. Also, that I might explore the connections and differences in how the children perceive the daily interactions, writing routines, and activities they participate in.

The classroom is a place where political, racial, and power dynamics and other critical-sociocultural factors exist (Freire, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lewis, 2003, Tatum; 1997). Thus, it is important and necessary to research the school writing experiences of Black, middle-class children from their own perspectives. There is much that educators and researchers may learn about writing curriculum, writing instruction, and the teaching and learning of writing when we pause to listen to voices that are often silenced or ignored. Therefore, the following questions guide my study:

1) What beliefs are held about school writing by Black upper middle-class children?
2) What are the personal experiences that resonate with them as they develop their understanding of what it means to write for school purposes?
3) How do sociocultural factors such as culture, school setting, and the broader education system shape their experiences with school writing?

Significance of the Study

Black middle-class children are underrepresented in K-12 research. Their perceptions and experiences are not privileged in academic literature in the same way as White middle-class children because of racial status. This invisible status in academic research can be understood in Anderson's (2015) description of society as predominantly White spaces:

> The wider society is still replete with overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, workplaces, churches and other associations, courthouses, and cemeteries, a situation that reinforces a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present…When present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally "off limits." For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society. (p. 10)

Although Anderson describes physical spaces, academic research and literature on middle-class children is a reflection of a "white space." The schooling experiences and opportunities for White middle-class children are perpetuated as normal, while reinforcing the idea that the experiences of Black middle-class children are not as significant or worthy of being researched in the same capacity. My study seeks to highlight the school writing experiences of Black upper middle-class children across different school settings. Although each school is racially distinct, the broader schooling system still reflects a White space because the writing curriculum, policy, standards, and assessments are largely controlled by White people in positions of power.

By listening to the stories of how Black upper middle-class children understand writing, educators and researchers may be able to reconceptualize their approaches to writing instruction so they are more inclusive and culturally-responsive to the needs of historically-marginalized children. Below, I briefly discuss four core areas that frame my study. I discuss each of these in greater detail in the Literature Review (Chapter 2).

Invisibility in the Language and Literacy Curriculum

School policies, curriculum, textbooks, and assessments are largely designed and regulated by dominant, hegemonic groups (Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017). These assumptions reflect Allen's (1978) "cultural equivalent theory," which highlights the false idea that Black middle-class families share the same experiences as White middle-class families simply because of class. Studies show that Black middle-class children have different schooling experiences from White children (Heath, 1983, Lareau, 2003; Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball, 2011), which support the notion that "literacy practices are specific to the political and ideological context and their consequences vary situationally" (Street, 1995, p. 24). This means that for Black children, the traditional approaches to writing instruction were formed without consideration for their language, culture, and history. Thus, the education system as a whole can be thought of as a "White space" in which Black children must learn to navigate and negotiate in order to be successful (Anderson, 2015). Black middle-class children must contend with race in school in ways that White middle-class children do not. They are more vulnerable to experiencing cultural mismatches with their teachers who remain largely White and female (Irvine, 1990; NCES, 2012; Owens, 2016), peers (Tatum, 1997), and often endure deeply racialized schooling experiences such as exclusion, alienation, and humiliation (Allen, 2010; Anderson, 2015). Additionally, their racial status as a Black student means that they are often ignored in the standardized curriculum (Howard, 2010; Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017), or

even receive inferior academic instruction (Booker Baker, 2005). National writing standards, curriculum, and assessments do not explicitly embrace culturally-responsive pedagogies that address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students; rather they are often designed for White, middle class children (Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017).

One of the largest and most recent educational policy reforms has been that of the Common Core State Standards (2010) initiative. These standards were introduced in 2009 as a way to provide equitable standards of academic achievement for students across the United States. The CCSS have been described as a corporate curriculum, with a central focus on preparing students for the demands of college and careers in a global economy (Pearson & Heibert, 2013). However, the CCSS are not without controversy and have been criticized for their lack of attention to students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and for their prescriptive, dominant-language standards (Denham, 2015; Wiley & Rolstad, 2014).

In her linguistic analysis of the Common Core language standards, Denham (2015) problematizes the language and assumptions inherent in a major Common Core English Language Arts standard for all K-12 students. She asserts that requiring students to "Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking" is problematic because it "further institutionalizes linguistic subordination and overlooks the discrimination suffered by speakers of non-mainstream dialects and non-native speakers of English" (p. 145). Furthermore, Denham takes issue with the body of curricula materials mass-marketed and published in an effort to align with the CCSS. These materials perpetuate the ideologies in the language standards and attempt to standardize and mass-market one language variety. Valdes (2015) argues, "When language is curricularized, its 'teaching' is approached as if it were an ordinary academic subject the learning of which is parallel to learning science,

history, or mathematics" (p. 262). An approach like this misguides teachers to correct students for the way they speak with the impression that they are helping students.

For Black children, Black English Vernacular (BEV), or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) are common cultural dialects. Washington and Craig (1994, 1998) assert that most Black children, despite socioeconomic status, use some form of Black English. Class status and race may afford Black middle-class students a linguistic repertoire that allows them the ability to style-shift, code-switch, and employ precise language choice for different purposes (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). Even so, students whose language and dialect fall outside of the mainstream are expected to assimilate and acquire the academic language of the school and use this dialect when speaking and writing. Such a position assumes identity is not integral to language, or that a non-mainstream way of speaking is inherently inferior. However, identity and language cannot be separated (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Smitherman, 1977), and the standardization of language does not imply inherent value in one dialect or another (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). *Students Right to Their Own Language* (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974) is a policy statement that was created in response to the inequitable advantages privileged to native speakers of an academic English. It argues for the affirmation of "students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language – or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" (p. 2). Furthermore, the social status afforded or denied to speakers of AAVE or BEV dialects, in combination with race and class represent forms of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Decades of educational research have focused on Black students in extremely limited contexts. Descriptors such as at-risk, low-income, high-crime, poverty, poor, and urban saturate

academic research and literature focused on Black students and their families (Clark, 1973; Compton-Lilly, 2014; Frazier, 1939; Moynihan; 1965). Whether it is important for researchers to understand the experiences of Black students in these conditions is not at issue here. Scholars in the field of education should continue to study the experiences of marginalized groups in spaces such as neighborhoods, communities, and schools. However, contexts that include labels such as poverty, urban, and low-income are not representative of the experiences of all Black people (Tatum, 1987). When Black students and their families are disproportionately researched in these ways, scholars perpetuate a single-story of an already racially and economically-marginalized group that reifies their position at the bottom of a socially-stratified system.

It is critical for researchers to widen their scope to examine the experiences of Black students who are not considered economically disadvantaged but continue to be marginalized by racial identity. Black middle-class students reflect this intersectionality. Brannon, Higginbotham, and Henderson (2017) assert that the intersection between Black and middle class in the United States occupies a "high rank" in terms of class, and a "low rank" in terms of race (p. 118). Such rankings indicate the ease or restriction of access to cultural materials, institutions, and resources. They include psychological and social factors that make it easier or more challenging to navigate society and move up in social status (Brannon, et al., 2017). Because social class is a highly subjective and nuanced construct, it cannot be identified and ranked in such a concrete matter. The cruel and oppressive historical injustices suffered by Black people in the United States (Zinn, 2011) attest to the fact that both race and class indeed afford certain groups of people more cultural capital, or socially and culturally privileged set of skills, than others (Bourdieu, 1973). However, it is important that researchers and scholars avoid defining Black middle-class

children as a monolithic group in academic research and literature. Identities of Blackness and middle-classness do not equate to all individuals having the same experiences.

Lastly, an intersectionality of race and class lead to invisibility in academic research in which the experiences of Black middle-class students are subsumed under their White, middle-class peers, or they are grouped with low-income or working-class Black children (Luttrell, 2008). There is little acknowledgement for the type of schooling experiences the intersection between race and class create for these students. Thus, it is important to consider how school writing experiences are shaped among these issues, and how children's beliefs about school writing are crafted within these contexts. In this study, Black upper middle-class children share their school writing experiences that are situated within their families, schools, neighborhoods, and cities located in the Southeast. Therefore, my study will help address some of the gaps in the research that do not explore themes of intersectionality for Black children.

Student Voice

Student voice, for the purposes of this study, is the body of beliefs, ideas, attitudes, and opinions students produce as they "participate in meaningful decision-making and dialogue regarding their learning environment and classroom climate for the purposes of building upon foundations of community and trust" (Ferguson, Hanreddy, & Draxton, 2011, p. 55). School writing can be a channel for student voice. Depending upon factors such as the context of the writing lesson and the purposes of the assignment/activity, opportunity exists for children to speak up and speak out through writing. However, these opportunities are often managed by people or systems that hold authority over the students.

Student voice is especially important to my study because if power dynamics and the positionality of students in a world of authority mean they "have been silenced all their lives"

(Giroux, 1992, p. 158), then students of color are twice-silenced as their racial status creates additional barriers in equitable schooling and education experiences. Black students in particular come from generations of deep-rooted, historical oppression in schools. Thompson (2011) contends, "'Voice' is inherently concerned with questions of power and knowledge, with how decisions are made, who is included and excluded and who is advantaged and disadvantaged as a result" (p. 21). In classrooms where students' voices, are "honored" they are more likely to feel empowered and connected to the classroom literacy activities (Oldfather, 1993, p. 673).

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* published by the United Nations (1989) was a significant international document that spurred decades of individual and government-sponsored research that focused on children's perspectives in research. The United Nations proclaimed that children have the rights to freely express their views, retain all aspects of their identity, and advocate for themselves, a statement that remains resolute today. The proliferation of such research has been documented in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and even the United States (Cook-Sather & Mawr, 2014). Today in the United States, funded research that seeks student voice is often connected to accountability measures, teacher performance, and student learning outcomes (Dillon, 2010). While student voice should inform teaching and learning practices, it also offers a springboard to conversations that address broader systemic issues within the U.S. education system; there is "transformative potential" because opportunities to effect change are possible (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004, p.139). Therefore, it is important to understand the voices of Black upper middle-class children and their views on school writing to shape the larger Discourse (Gee, 2011) on making school a more equitable institution for all students.

Writing in the Elementary Classroom

Children's experiences with writing in elementary school play a key role in their development as writers (Collier, 2010; Dyson 1992; 1995; McCarthey, 2001; Rasinski & DeFord, 1986; Seban & Tavsanli, 2015; Slavin, Madden, & Karweit, 1989). The elementary school years formatively shape and influence children's first impressions with academic writing. The writing instruction a student receives can look different based upon a number of factors. Two elements that largely influence a student's classroom writing experience are the writing approaches students are repeatedly exposed to and individual teachers.

Writing approaches. Writing is an art that reflects personal style, voice, language, and lived experiences. However, it also requires a finessing of skill and technique. It is not surprising then that a one-size-fits-all approach to the teaching and learning of writing in elementary school does not exist and cannot exist. When teaching writing, teachers often draw on a combination of models and beliefs (Cutler & Graham, 2008).

Ivanic (2004) posits a theory that identifies specific discourses of writing and learning to write, and then structures these discourses within broader concepts of language. She defines discourses as "constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and the sorts of approaches to teaching and assessment which are likely to be associated with these beliefs" (p. 224). Within this framework Ivanic identifies the following six writing discourses:

- skills discourse (focus: conventions, mechanics, grammar)
- creativity discourse (focus: expression, language, imagination)
- process discourse (focus: planning, drafting, revising)
- genre discourse (focus: modeling text characteristics and attributes)

- social practice discourse (focus: authentic or real-world application)
- sociopolitical discourse (focus: critique, politics, agency)

Each of these discourses represent ways that children may perceive school writing, as well as ways that teachers focus their writing instruction. Teachers are powerful forces in shaping the writing development and experiences of children so it is necessary to consider their beliefs about writing instruction and how they are formed. Writing instruction varies greatly from teacher to teacher (McCarthey, 2014; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston, & Echevarria, 1998; Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011) and teachers often draw on a combination of writing discourses (Cutler & Graham, 2008; McCarthey, 2014).

While the six approaches are rooted in common ways to understand writing, they can become problematic if children's writing experiences are too narrow and constrained within certain discourses. For instance, if a child's school writing experiences primarily center on genre and creativity, then they can miss opportunities to authentically explore critical thinking and social issues through writing. For Black middle-class children then, it's important to consider if opportunities are provided to dialogue with peers about race, language, culture, and political issues and confidently share their stories and opinions in a classroom writing space. Children come to understand themselves as writers in these contexts, and much of a child's experience with writing will be guided by the classroom teacher.

Teachers. The teacher is a critical part of a student's school setting in which learning takes place. Teachers themselves, much like the diverse learners they face, embody a multitude of beliefs, experiences, biases, and ideologies. Teachers bring to the classroom their own set of idiosyncrasies, talents, vices, fears, joys, problems, and motivations. Their personal experiences with writing, as well as their philosophical stances on writing, make a difference in how they

approach the subject with students in their own classrooms (Lortie, 1975; McCarthey, 2014). There is evidence that teachers can negatively and positively affect learning outcomes (Hillocks, 1986; Ladson Billings, 1995; Mahiri, 1998; Seban & Tavsanli, 2015). I review research and literature that addresses teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and motivation toward teaching writing, in order to situate students' perception of their teacher in relation to their instructional practices and writing approaches in Chapter 2.

Because school writing is bound in a complex web of identity, race, language, culture, social justice, and equity, it is necessary to explore it using theories that recognize these issues in the role of development and experience. In the following section, I discuss the combination of theories that frame my study.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of critical race theory and sociocultural theory of learning served as the theoretical framework for my study. Here I provide a brief description of what these theories generally assert and then I outline each one in greater detail and explain how it supported my research.

First, I used critical race theory to highlight issues of race, racism, class, power, and equity within the schooling context. Critical race theory focuses on how race is positioned in larger systems such as education and how political and systemic forces can create unjust experiences for marginalized persons (Bell 1992; 1995; Crenshaw 1988; 1995; Delgado, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998 & Solorzano, 1997; 1998). As an extension of critical race theory, intersectionality was explored as a relevant concept. Intersectionality is a theoretical concept which asserts that the convergence of multiple identities (race, class, gender, sexual-orientation for example) create a unique experience greater than the sum of the parts (Crenshaw, 1991; Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). Intersectionality works well as an extension of critical race theory

because it takes the intersection of multiple identities and examines them within similar contexts of marginalization, power, privilege, access, and inequality. In my study, I used intersectionality to focus on race and class.

Secondly, I drew on sociocultural theory of learning. Sociocultural theory of learning offers a lens to understand individuals within broader contexts such as social, cultural, historical, family, community, and school contexts. I used sociocultural theory of learning to understand how culture, learning environments, and the education system contribute to a student's beliefs and understanding about writing. These social contexts are significant factors that influence cognitive development and learning (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch, 1991).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is used in education scholarship to understand and address how race contributes to inequitable and unjust experiences among students of color within the education system. Originally derived from the field of Critical Legal Studies, CRT emerged in the 1970s as critical legal scholars and activists began to recognize a need to exclusively examine U.S. policy, law, and civil rights in conjunction with and in relation to race and racism (Anders, & Devita, 2014). Critical Legal Studies (CLS) on its own developed in response to those challenging the decisions made in previously successful 1960s civil rights court cases (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). The focus of CLS was to increase attention to the ways in which law creates and maintains dominant ideologies, inequities, and disparate social conditions. For the purposes of this study, I drew on the collective contributions of former legal scholars, Crenshaw (1988; 1995) Delgado (1995), Bell (1992; 1995) and critical race scholars Ladson-Billings (1998) and Solorzano (1997; 1998) whose critiques of critical legal studies and theoretical insights on race informed and shaped the core underpinnings of critical race theory as it is commonly understood today.

While CRT can be interpreted differently across various fields and scholars, Delgado and Stefanic (2017) assert that scholars who embrace CRT recognize some common themes of CRT such as the ordinary, permanent, and ubiquitous status of racism, the power and privilege experienced by the dominant group, or the White race, and the "unique voice of color" that marginalized persons have due to their "histories and experiences with oppression" (pp. 8-11).

In my study, I understood and applied critical race theory based upon five tenets posited by Solorzano (2004), many of which overlap with the themes previously described: 1) "the centrality of race and racism," 2) "the challenge to dominant ideology," 3)"the commitment to social justice," 4) "the centrality of experiential knowledge," and 5) "the transdisciplinary perspective" (p. 17). Below I explore each of these tenets in depth and discuss how they related to my study.

The centrality of race and racism. It is necessary to recognize that race and racism will be a part of a Black child's experience the U.S. schooling system. From a historical perspective, Black children have been denied, excluded from, and offered inferior and inequitable education. Today, the education system remains largely driven by White, wealthy men in power. Curriculum, assessment, policies, and standards continue to privilege White, middle class culture as the norm, thereby positioning children of color as "others" who must adapt and conform to White, middle-class culture and values in order to be successful in school (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016). In this way, Hernandez (2000) asserts, "Whiteness is viewed as the norm and hence not a race" (p. 72). Because of these cultural norms, Black children can be overlooked and undervalued within the education system. The education system is designed in a way that privileges Whiteness. Therefore, the history, culture, language, and learning styles of Black children are not reflected in the textbooks and curricula. Rather these elements become tokenized

as supplements or incorporated as multicultural curricula. Au, Brown, & Calderón (2016) argue that whiteness and silence both permeate U.S. curriculum, "thus rendering voice for some while simultaneously establishing silence for others" (p. 7). Black students then enter the schooling system with imposed racialized learning experiences and racism.

This schooling experience reflects academic definitions of racism in which "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities" (Wellman, 1977, p. xviii), and students of color navigate "a system of ignorance, exploitation and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color" (Marable, 1992, p. 5). As Black children develop as writers and adopt their own beliefs and ideas about what it means to write for school, the education system as a racialized space must be considered as part of the learning context.

The challenge to dominant ideology. One goal of this study was to offer a different view of Black children. There is much research that presents Black children in a monolithic light, such as at-risk, disadvantaged, or academically inferior (Dorimé-Williams, 2014). Yosso (2005/2006) states that this particular tenet of CRT includes challenging "research that silences, ignores, and distorts epistemologies of People of Color" (p. 171). In this way, I purposefully chose to research Black children whose families are well-educated, hold professional positions, and are widely regarded as middle or upper-middle class. As Dorimé -Williams' (2014) aptly states, "Black ≠ Poor."

The commitment to social justice. Writing has the potential to be a dynamic social justice tool. It represents a source of democratic participation (Fine, 2004; Kuby, 2013; Oakes & Rogers, 2006), personal and group empowerment (Ife, 2012; Muhammad, 2012), and identity

exploration and affirmation (Flint & Fisher-Ari, 2014; Kinloch & Burkhard, 2016; Johnson, 2017). The ability to use writing in these ways can translate into what Bourdieau (1973) terms *cultural capital*, or social and cultural currency that affords greater access and opportunity in modern society. The ability to write well academically is a form of cultural capital in modern society. Black children are vulnerable to experiencing cultural disconnects with school writing and assessment. For example, in the 2011 Nation's Report Card, 11% of Black students scored in the proficient or advanced range, but that number more than triples for White students. Because students who are adept in the language and practices of school writing are afforded greater amounts of cultural capital and opportunity (Delpit, 1988), school writing becomes a social justice issue. Thus, Black upper middle-class students' understanding of school writing should be explored within a social justice lens.

The centrality of experiential knowledge. The role of voice plays an important role in critical race theory. Ladson-Billings (1998) contends that the utilization of voice, through storytelling, offers a way to highlight "cultural viewpoints" (p. 13). People of color are recognized as holding experiential knowledge therefore the stories and experiences of marginalized people are centered and valued in CRT. Racism is highlighted and exposed through these everyday experiences and stories which represent the truths and realities of people of color (Delgado 1990). While the children in my study may not be able to articulate specific examples and stories of racism, I will center their narratives amid the racialized educational backdrop I described previously and look for patterns of injustice, White privilege, or power in their school experiences. This tenet of CRT appropriately mirrors my narrative inquiry methodology in which stories collected from interviews serve as the main source of data.

Depending on a variety of factors, writing experiences for children have the potential to be meaningful, authentic, and powerful experiences for children or just the opposite (Newkirk, & Kittle, 2013). Black middle-class children who are often overlooked or ignored because they do not fall into typified categories of White and middle-class, or Black and working-class (Luttrell, 2008), are vulnerable to receiving a message of indifference from teachers. The teacher plays a critical role in crafting or denying such an experience, so it is important to listen to how children perceive their interactions with their teacher. Additionally, parents, peers, school setting, and culture shape a student's experience. Each of these factors contribute to one's experiential knowledge and is explored in terms of school writing beliefs.

The transdisciplinary perspective. Lastly, CRT embraces and considers perspectives from multiple disciplines and viewpoints. In my study, I drew on both historical and sociological perspectives to help situate the origin and present-day status of Black middle-class families. For instance, what does it mean to be a Black middle-class family in 2019? A historical perspective considers enslaved ancestry in the United States, Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights Movement as well as the social, economic, and political barriers and disparity Black people have faced in achieving a middle-class status.

I also use a sociological perspective to look at common status metrics as measured by today's standards. For instance, salary, profession, education, neighborhood/home values, and the reputation of the public school one's child attends are all social measures that indicate one's social status (Putnam, 2015). A middle-class or upper-middle class family in the United States typically has a combination of these statuses that afford them a lifestyle of recreation and leisure experiences, access to resources, and entry into a network of others with similar privilege and

power (Reeves, 2017). Both of these perspectives help situate Black middle-class families in 2019.

Each of the tenets above informed my understanding of critical race theory and its role in my study. Applying critical race theory as a theoretical perspective 1) enables students to critically examine and reflect on what they're learning about writing and themselves as young Black children, 2) provides educators, researchers, and policy-makers with an awareness of student beliefs and perceptions that may in turn inform teaching practices and policy development that provide more equitable experiences for students of color, and 3) positions the voices of Black upper middle-class children as valuable, worthy, and a source of unique knowledge and experience.

Intersectionality

The term intersectionality is discussed here as a theoretical extension of CRT. Intersectionality was first conceptualized in 1892 by Anna Julia Cooper and later coined and popularized by Kimberle Crenshaw (1995). Although it originated as a way to explore the identities and experiences of Black women specifically in terms of racism and sexism, intersectionality has since been embraced more broadly as a way to explore the intersections between any multiple identities such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, dis/ability, etc. Crenshaw (1991) states, "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum" of such "single-axis" dimensions of identity (p. 140). In other words, multiple identities come together and create a specific space and experience that cannot be parsed into the origin of single-facet identities. In this way, "Black middle-class" represents a concept of wholeness (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014); an experience different from being only Black, or only middle-class. This experience is then set within systems and structures to understand equity, access, and marginalization.

Dill and Zambrana (2009) define intersectionality "as an analytical strategy – a systematic approach to understanding human life and behavior that is rooted in the experience and struggles of marginalized people" (p. 4). Intersectionality is used in my study to explore the space between race and class identities in Black upper middle-class children and how it frames their schooling experiences. For instance, Matsuda (1990) suggests a strategy in which people "ask the other question". She states,

> When I see something that looks racist, I ask "Where is the patriarchy in this?" When I see something that looks sexist, I ask "Where is the heterosexism in this?" When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, "Where are the class interests in this?" (p. 1189)

In this way, I used intersectionality to ask, "How does race factor into a privileged schooling experience?" Or "In a predominantly-White school, where are the class dynamics?" Exploring the intersection of identities allows for a dynamic examination of the individual experience within a particular "social group" that calls attention to inequity, disparity, power, privilege, and access (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 12).

Intersectionality allowed me to examine education and schooling experiences in terms of race, social justice, access, and equity for Black children who are also upper middle-class. Because middle-class economic status aligns with the dominant, institutional, and privileged ways of being, it can be assumed that Black upper middle-class children are afforded certain degrees of cultural capital because they are accustomed to the experiences and lifestyle a middle-class upbringing affords them. However, despite such aspects of privilege and access, research shows that Black middle-class students, must still mediate race as a barrier in school (Dorime-Williams, 2014; Martin, 2010).

Critical race theory and intersectionality purposefully position race at the forefront of equity issues. These lenses should be applied to the teaching and learning of writing in classrooms because historically-marginalized students are positioned as literacy learners within the confines of education policies, standards, curriculum, and ideologies largely created by dominant people in power that reflect White, Eurocentric, middle-class values and experiences (Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017). Because Black children gain a foundation for writing in the elementary classroom within broader hegemonic and racially-inequitable schooling systems that institute policy, curriculum, and standards, their experiences and stories deserve to be examined critically.

Sociocultural Theory of Learning

Sociocultural theory of learning asserts that an individual's social and cultural contexts (their environment, relationships, experiences, family, culture, and broader societal factors) significantly influence their development and learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). In short, the context of learning matters and must be considered in human development. Given the dynamic interactions and experiences that are ongoing and ever-present in shaping children's learning experiences, a sociocultural framework is necessary to explore the phenomenon of how a student comes to understand writing and literacy. This means that everything from the school climate and environment (Oakes & Rogers, 2006), the socioeconomic status of a student and their surrounding peers (Putnam, 2015), parental support and influence (Lareau, 2003), family and community literacy practices (Cushman, et al., 2006; Heath, 1983), language varieties (Smitherman, 1977), and the writing curriculum and teaching approaches (Applebee, 1996; Sleeter & Flores Carmona, 2017) can influence how a student experiences writing. It can also inform the attitudes and beliefs toward writing that are formed as a result.

Each of these environmental factors directly and indirectly shape the educational landscape and individual schooling experiences for students. Ball (2006) highlights the importance of attending to broader cultural contexts in conducting research on writing:

> The researchers who focus on writing and writing instruction in culturally diverse classrooms have confirmed that the interrelationships between language, culture, and writing are strong. Their findings indicate that culture influences students' and teachers' classroom practices, as well as their conscious and unconscious interactions and expectations. (p. 301)

While my research did not explicitly focus on culturally diverse classrooms, I applied the same principals to my study in that the culture of the school and classroom were examined through the perspective of the student. This allowed me to see where opportunities exist for more relevant connections between language, culture, and writing.

It is important to note that the social dimension of sociocultural theory of learning extends to cultural, historical, and institutional dynamics (Wertsch, 1991). For example, a child is immersed in the languages of family and community, while participating in schooling institutions that value certain kinds of literacies and literacy practices (Heath, 1983). Complicating these contexts are a student's prior knowledge, their personal experiences, interactions with available resources, curriculum, policies, peers, and teachers. Thus, Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory of learning positions this myriad of social interactions as significant influences on cognitive growth and childhood development.

However, the interactions that occur between the individual and the social and cultural contexts do not automatically spur cognitive development. Rather, Vygotsky (1978) posits that individuals actively mediate their environments through semiotic signs and tools such as

language and writing as a way to respond to their environment. It is through this kind of mediation in which the process of learning occurs (Rogoff, et. al, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). This act of mediation is a central concept in Vygotskian sociocultural theory. This mediation is significant because the ways in which students mediate their individual cognition and social environment work to craft, alter, shape, and inform subsequent outcomes and experiences. The "psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137). For instance, the pedagogical choices a teacher makes in facilitating a writing lesson, the classroom atmosphere, and the nature of the writing lesson are all social and institutional contextual factors, whereas a student's motivation, interests, writing goals, and perceived ability, may be psychological tools that mediate a students' writing experience. Students bring to the writing lesson their past experiences with writing, individual cognitive abilities, and personal attitudes and beliefs about writing.

The negotiation of these dynamics through writing, language, cognitive thought processes, literature, etc. will evoke different responses for students. As a result of such mediation, perhaps some students are more inclined to write in class or receive a confidence boost in their writing ability. In contrast, the mediation may lead a student to withdraw from a writing lesson or affirm negative beliefs about writing. Wertsch (1994) contends that in sociocultural theory,

> the intent is to view human action and sociocultural setting as analytically distinct, yet inherently interrelated levels of analysis. In this view one cannot provide an account of human action without taking its cultural, institutional, and historical setting into account. On the other hand, such settings are produced and reproduced through human action (p. 203).

Here, Wertsch highlights the reciprocal nature of the relationship between human action (a student's thoughts, beliefs, understandings, schemas, actions) and the cultural, institutional, and historical social settings (education policy, standards, curriculum, the school, the classroom, the teacher, the writing lesson). Studying children's experiences with writing, then requires understanding the situated nature of writing and analyzing the development of beliefs in terms of both personal action and social settings.

Wertsch (1991) extends upon Vygotsky's (1978) theory of mediation to highlight the concept of mediation as mediated *action*, drawing attention to the concept of agency that people have. Wertsch believes that mediation is not a process that individuals passively experience. It is not something that happens upon them, or to them, but rather a process that is facilitated by active response and engagement. Therefore, acts of withdrawal, resistance, acceptance, and perseverance may all be mediated actions students engage in to shape their experiences of school writing.

Children are diverse learners in every way imaginable. From culture to language, economic backgrounds, ethnicity, personality, motivation, self-esteem, knowledge-base, cognitive functioning, beliefs, and experiences, every student will bring different factors to bear in the writing classroom. Bazerman's (2016) definition of writing reflects the scope of individual traits and characteristics a student brings to writing and literacy learning. He defines writing as "a complex social participatory performance in which the writer asserts meaning, goals, actions, affiliations, and identities within a constantly changing, contingently organized social world, relying on shared texts and knowledge" (p. 18). The act of writing then is as complex as the child writers themselves.

Students take these individual characteristics and writing dispositions and use them to negotiate their daily interactions and experiences (Vygotsky, 1962; Wertsch, 1991). How Black middle-class children experience and understand school writing, then is influenced by a multitude of sociocultural factors. Research shows there are benefits to applying sociocultural and culture theories to learning and literacy (Barton, 1991; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). Such frameworks support the variances of family, community, and cultural literacies and how these may come to bear on marginalized students in schooling systems that operate under the values of White and middle-class literacy practices.

It is clear that the school writing experiences of Black middle-class children offer much to consider in terms of intersectionality, equity, identity, and education. My theoretical framework of critical race theory and sociocultural theory of learning provided a lens to examine these facets of school writing. An illustration of the theoretical framework I've just described is presented below in Figure 1.1. In Chapter 2, I explore these ideas in depth through a review of literature and research on the Black middle-class family, the negotiation of the language and literacy curriculum, common writing approaches used in school, and social networks that influence children's perception of writing.

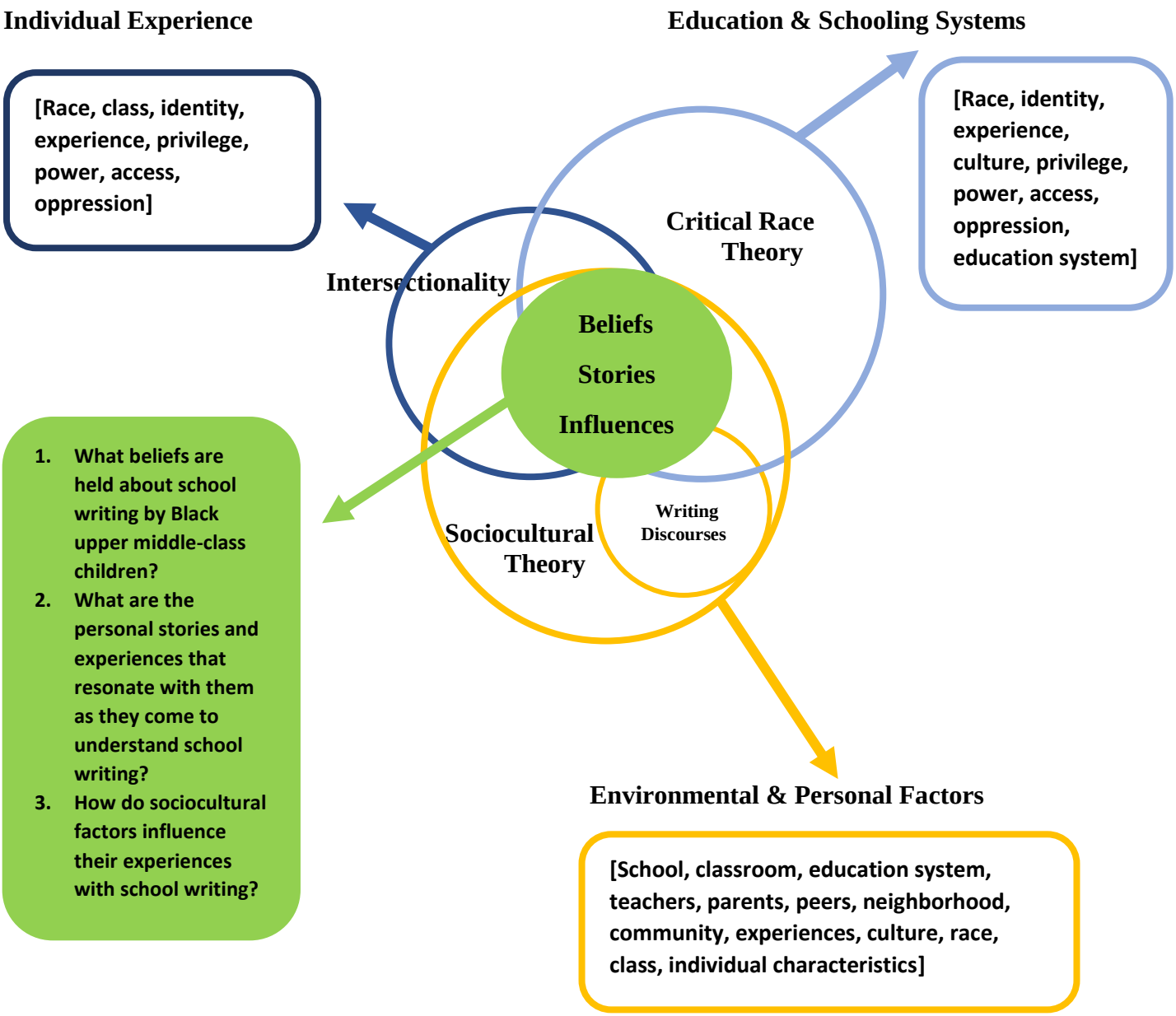

Figure 1.1 Illustration of Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The racial and socioeconomic status of Black middle-class children represent an intersectionality worthy of exploring within the context of literacy development in school. The school writing experiences for Black middle-class children reflect complexity and nuance that are influenced by a combination of factors. To adequately explore these aspects within critical race theory (Bell 1992; 1995; Crenshaw 1988; 1995; Delgado, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998 & Solorzano, 1997; 1998) and sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991), it is necessary to review several factors that have the power to influence children's school writing experiences. First, I begin with a discussion of some ways to define and view Black middle-class families. From there I discuss issues of equity that are presented in language and literacy curriculum for Black students, an overview of general writing approaches that children may experience in classrooms and subsequent implications, influences of social networks, and lastly, the importance of recognizing student voice in research about children.

Defining the Black Middle Class

Who are the Black middle class? The answer to this is subjective and fluid depending upon the varying theoretical perspectives and the shifting sociopolitical and economic climates. In the 1980s, the popular television sitcom *The Cosby Show* represented the epitome of a Black middle-class or upper-middle class family for millions of families across America. Nearly thirty years later, *Blackish* another popular sitcom, is the new face of a Black American middle to upper-middle class family. Both of these shows drew significant attention for the portrayal of Black culture and the dynamic of race and class intersectionality. They offered a glimpse into the lives of two-parent households, where parents are doctors or lawyers and live in a nice

neighborhood with children who have an abundance of experience, education, and opportunity at their fingertips. This reality is not the norm for most Black families in the United States (Reeves & Joo, 2017; Rodrigue & Reeves, 2015). Indeed, Reeves (2017) asserts that of the top 20% of upper-middle class families, only 6% are Black families. It is important to discuss the Black middle class from both a sociological and historical perspective because they offer different contextual understandings of the origins of the Black middle class.

First, it is important to note that the United States government offers no formal definition of what constitutes a middle-class status similar to the way a federal poverty line has been established (Sraders, 2019). For Reeves (2017), income is the main qualifier for a middle-class status. He argues that the top 20% of American families who earn incomes that are at, or above $112,000 yearly are considered upper-middle class. This middle-class construct extends to other areas of life such as access to a quality education, a healthy lifestyle, a stable family unit, and a highly-connected social network. Economist Robert Putnam (2015) also researches class status in terms of upward mobility and opportunity for children in America. To describe the class status of families and children in his book, he used education or a combination of socioeconomic variables such as income, education, and occupation. Putnam asserted that generally education is the most influential socioeconomic factor to correlate with "economic security, family structure, parenting, schooling, [and] neighborhoods" (p. 7). In regard to a Black middle class, he posits that class rather than race accounts for the differences in how children experience these factors. For example, his research shows that there is a trend in class segregation by race, "so affluent and impoverished black (or Latino) families are less likely to be neighbors than they were 40 years ago" (p. 39). Thus, socioeconomic status can serve as both an equalizer and divider; it can connect children of all races and ethnicities from middle-class backgrounds through

neighborhood, school, and community, but it can also limit opportunities for children of different social classes to play, learn, and interact together (Lareau, 2003; Rodrigue & Reeves, 2015).

In Lareau's (2003) 10-year ethnography she intimately participated in and observed the lives of 12 Black and White children from poor, working-class, and middle-class families. Middle-class children in the study were defined as "those who live in households in which at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills" (p. 279). Because of the tendency for the Black middle class and the Black working class to overlap in research and literature (Lacy, 2007; Patillo, 2013), I also provide Lareau's (2003) definition of the working-class children in her study:

> those who live in households in which neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills. This category includes lower-level white collar workers. (p. 279)

It is clear in both definitions that Lareau also privileges education as a fundamental part of socioeconomic status. In terms of child-rearing practices, lifestyle, and upward mobility Lareau found Black middle-class children experienced more commonalities with White middle-class children than they did with Black children from poor or working-class families. Lareau argues that "concerted cultivation" is a middle-class way of parenting that affords both Black and White children what Bourdieu (1973) terms *cultural capital* – the social skills, education, experiences, language, and personality traits that are privileged by middle-class society to access upward mobility.

While class status affords similar life experiences for Black and White middle-class families in some ways, it does not preclude Black families from experiencing the world as a Black person in a racialized, discriminatory, and prejudiced society. Theories that heavily negate race as a critical factor assume the existence of a cultural equivalence (Allen, 1978; Tatum, 1987). Viewing the Black middle class as the same as the White middle class should be cautiously approached because it ignores the historical inequity Blacks have experienced in upward mobility, and the disparaging effects they continue to endure which I later discuss in this review.

For purposes of this study, I define Black upper middle class by drawing on a combination of sociological metrics that privilege education, occupation, and income as key metrics of socioeconomic status. In my study, Black upper middle class represents an identity that reflects a combination of race and socioeconomic status: members of the Black race who are in family units where 1) one or both parents are college-educated, 2) one or both parents work in a professional capacity, and 3) parents earn a combined income that reflects approximately three to four times the median annual income for the state, or approximately $168,000-$224,000. Since Black families who have an upper middle-class status represent only a fraction of Black families in the United States (Reeves, 2017), it is necessary then to orient this disparity historically to understand present-day conditions.

History of the Black Middle Class

Historically, the origin of the Black middle class can be traced to the separation of Black people into upper and lower classes based on the division of slaves by skin color. Lighter-skinned slaves were more likely to work in servant roles in the plantation big house, while darker-skinned slaves were forced into more intense, back-breaking labor in the fields (Otis

Graham, 2000). These class divisions related to skin color continued post-slavery when light skin, or features that reflected White ancestry, were more socially valuable. Black people with these racial characteristics were more likely to work for White people in their homes, exposing them to a "culture and lifestyle" not afforded to those with darker skin. (Lacy, 2007, p. 24). This group is often referred to in the literature as the "old black elite" or the "mulatto elite" (Keith & Herring, 1991; Lacy, 2007; Landry, 1987; Patillo, 2013). "The mulatto elite lived in white neighborhoods or elite sections of black neighborhoods, worked for white clients, and privileged the lifestyle of the white upper class" (Lacy, 2007, p. 26).

The mulatto elite formed tight-knit social networks that went beyond light skin color. Family background, dialect, taste, and etiquette were all necessary to experience membership into this exclusive group. Marriages and births were purposefully arranged within these social circles in order to maintain certain features and family lineage. While skin color, ancestry, and association with Whites helped some Blacks gain entry into an elite class post-slavery, these characteristics did not entirely sustain their status (Lacy, 2007).

The early part of the twentieth century marked a period of great industry and commerce for the United States. The Ford Motor company was established, the Industrial Revolution sparked a growth in factories and production, construction of railroads were underway, and the Panama Canal was being built. Between 1820 and 1920 nearly 30 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. to join the labor force (Landry, 1987). With racial tensions still alive and well, this left Black workers in the North and South "largely passed over for white immigrant workers" (p. 20). However, the enactment of the National Origins Quota Act brought about further sociopolitical and economic changes. This legislative policy effectively limited the European immigrants accepted into the United States, which left numerous vacancies available to Black workers

(Landry, 1987). Thus, between 1910 and 1960, more than 4.6 million Black people migrated to fill industrial positions in Northern cities. These jobs offered a chance for upward mobility and a better quality of life (p. 20). This period known as "The Great Migration" contributed to the development of Black metropolitan city centers and needs for services in Black communities that Whites refused to meet or could not meet (Patillo, 2013).

It is these historical developments that helped give rise to a different Black middle class, or what Lacy (2007) refers to as the "nouveau rich" (p. 26), that worked to de-position the "old Black elite" (Landry, 1987). In other words, the Black middle class came to be represented by a different group of people. Patillo (2013) outlines three causes that contributed to the shift away from skin color and connection as middle-class qualifiers: 1) Whites began to move away from Black communities, 2) Blacks in the White service industry (butlers, caterers, cooks, tailors, blacksmiths) now had to compete with White, European immigrants, and 3) the "elite" status of some Blacks led them to avoid business endeavors to provide service to the "black masses" (pp. 16-17). The self-created boundaries that had formerly positioned the "old Black elite" as superior, left them vulnerable to downward mobility at the turn of the 20th century because the mulatto status no longer afforded the same benefits. Therefore, new opportunities for social advancement were presented to other Blacks irrespective of mulatto identity, changing the face of Black middle-class members.

Thus, between 1910 and 1960, the characteristics of Black families who enjoyed a middle-class status shifted. No longer was it afforded to those closest to Whiteness by way of birth and connection, but it was now earned by business and career-oriented individuals serving the Black communities – the same Black communities snubbed by the mulatto elite (Landry, 1987; Patillo, 2013). Middle-class positions consisted of clerical workers, small business owners

(largely in personal service industries such as barber shops, restaurants, grocery stores, tailors, beauty shops), and professionals such as dentists, doctors, and lawyers (Patillo, 2013, p. 17). Educational attainment was also a new pathway for Black people to achieve middle or upper-middle class status. Black colleges and universities offered educational opportunities previously denied to Black students and by the end of the 1960s, 105,000 students were enrolled in Black colleges (McAdam, 1982).

While education and certain professions offered a middle-class status for both Blacks and Whites, when compared to their White counter-parts Blacks experienced severe economic disparity. For middle-class Blacks the opportunities for business development, career advancement, and professional employment were limited because they were often restricted to their communities. Their lives were "defined by the reinforcement and strengthening of black-white boundaries in the form of Jim Crow legislation, racial residential segregation, and social exclusion" (Lacy, 2007, p. 26). Racial boundaries permeated every aspect of life for Black people, spurring inequalities that would span generations and remain visible today for Black families and Black children.

Whites did not suffer from the same racial tensions and boundaries that denied Blacks access (Du Bois, 1967). Opportunity for upward mobility was more widely available for Whites. They earned disproportionately higher salaries for doing the same job. For instance, in 1910 1.4% of Blacks held professional positions compared to 4.8% of Whites, and 0.8% of Blacks held clerical-sales positions, compared to 11.6% of Whites (Landry, 1987). Nearly twenty years later, the salary of a Black doctor was $2,500 while that of a White doctor was nearly 4 times higher (Landry, 1987). This glaring inequity affirms the need to study the Black middle-class as a separate and distinct entity from middle-class America, or the White middle class (Lacy, 2007;

Landry, 1987; Patillo, 2013; Tatum, 1987). The White middle class has not manifested under the same oppressive conditions.

The 1960s were a demarcation in the struggle for equality and civil rights for Black Americans. The decade marked a turning point in distinguishing what Landry (1987) coins a "new Black middle class" as opposed to the "old Black middle class" or the "nouveau rich" that emerged fifty years prior. With the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Landry contends that the life chances of Blacks increased substantially:

> If we think of life chances as the consumption of necessary goods and services (such as education, health care, and housing) made possible by an individual or family's economic resources, then there arose among middle-class blacks for the first time the possibility that their life chances would be determined by the size of their pocketbooks rather than the color of their skin. (p. 84)

Here Landry illustrates how the Civil Rights Movement created new opportunities for Black families, highlighting a shift from race to economy as the criteria that allowed for upward mobility. However, there is a significant body of research that supports the idea that chances for upward mobility for Black people remain bound by race in many respects. The schooling and education system in the United States is one prevalent example.

Negotiating the Language and Literacy Curriculum

Today K-8 classrooms reflect more ethnically and linguistically diverse students than ever before (Paris, 2015). Unfortunately, standard educational curriculum often has implicit language ideologies that afford power and prestige to certain language varieties and traditional concepts of literacy. It is necessary to recognize the competencies of Black students in terms of sociolinguistic abilities and funds of knowledge (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Below I

discuss research that highlights language and literacy as cultural underpinnings of identity and learning.

Dialectal Differences

As culturally and linguistically diverse students navigate schooling institutions, language ideologies are present in nearly every aspect of curriculum. Language ideologies are ideas and beliefs about language that are widely accepted at face value and taken for granted. They are notions of language that become so normalized, people no longer question them; even when they are biased, racist, incorrect, or position some human beings as superior and others as inferior (Fairclough, 1992). Black children must negotiate hegemonic language ideologies to be successful in school. Nearly all Black children, no matter their social class, speak some form of Black English dialect or vernacular (Washington & Craig, 1994, 1998). Smitherman's (1977) research on the language of Black America describes the Black English dialect as one with distinct style and roots that trace back to West African speech patterns. Smitherman argues that the grammar of Black English dialect has "syntactical structure and idiomatic rules [which] require considerable time and practice to master. Moreover, the one item of a language that remains relatively rigid and fixed over time is its structure" (p. 6). In this way, Smitherman affirms Black English as a rich, authentic language variety with its own internal patterns. It is not compared to a mainstream variety in terms of correctness or social status.

For Black children who have the ability to code-switch, such bidialectalism is a linguistic competency that can aid them in maintaining their identity and connection with the Black culture, community, or peer group (Delpit, 2002; Kutz, 1997), while negotiating a curriculum that positions Black English as inferior. Behizadeh (2017) explored linguistic diversity during a four-week summer writing project with nearly 30 Black middle school students in which the

concept of code-meshing (Canagarajah, 2013; Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2014), or composing in a way that blends two or more dialects, was explored with the students. At the end of the writing project, students experimented with code-meshing in their own writing. The writing project helped students develop a critical understanding of language diversity, but many students still thought that a mainstream dialect was most appropriate for academic writing. Interestingly, this opinion is echoed by teachers and authority figures in U.S. school systems who do not value the home language and literacies of students (Irvine, 1990).

Richards (1995) describes the elementary and secondary school writing experiences of two Black college students, Rhonda and Mickey by asserting that they were "largely unrewarded for demonstrating competence in their home language" which Richards described as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (p. 11). Rhonda recalled a story from fifth grade where she attended a predominantly White school and was constantly corrected for her use of AAVE dialect. As a result, she came to understand good writing as proper sentences, correct grammar, and organized structure. Richards described Rhonda as being able to play the writing game, but at the sacrifice of her own voice (pp. 13-14). In contrast, Mickey persisted in writing in a casual, outspoken tone to express his opinions; his "Black voice" was loud and clear on the page (p. 10) and it was rejected as academically-inferior.

Godley, Carpenter, and Werner (2007) used ethnographic methods to study the classroom communication, interactions, and patterns in a 10th grade English class during "Daily Language Practice." The researchers observed Cindy, a White, middle-aged teacher as she taught the 31 majority-Black student participants. Cindy believed she was responsible for helping her students master the school district's language standards, which included being able to speak and write in "business appropriate" ways. Godley et. al observed 133 Daily Language Practice events that

largely centered on students' being asked to point out grammatical errors in a few sentences when the teacher called on them. They found the students understood that the purpose of the exercise was to help them become well-versed in a mainstream, academic language, although many of them found the activity irritating. Furthermore, the researchers found the instructional program filled with language ideologies such as monolingual prescriptivism and no indication that the Daily Language Practice improved students' understanding or use of Standard English. Many of the students already understood that certain language was appropriate for different places.

Opportunities to read, discuss, and share aloud are common practices in most classrooms. These experiences can be enriching or leave students feeling vulnerable. Michaels (1986) found that differences in oral and literate language styles between Deena, an eight-year old Black girl, and her White teacher led to misunderstanding, frustration, and a communication breakdown. During the sharing time events the teacher asked students to share about one important event and expected a type of topic-centered oral narrative. Michaels observed that Deena's narratives did not follow the expected pattern. Although her stories were logical and reflected a common oral style from within the Black community, the teacher continually interrupted and corrected Deena's narrative for clarification and redirection. She effectively caused Deena to shut down and retreat. When teachers force students to speak in a way where they must first filter their thoughts through grammatical rules, silence is often the result (Delpit, 2006). Because Deena's oral literacy practices were different from the mainstream standards and the teacher's ideological position, she was positioned and viewed as illogical and incoherent. In this study, Deena's identity as a competent literacy learner was disaffirmed by the teacher.

Heath's (1983) ethnography exemplifies how deeply intertwined children's language development is with children's race, culture, class, and identity. Heath studied the literacy practices, child-rearing practices, recreation, ways of knowing, and schooling experiences of families in two different working-class communities in North Carolina. The Trackton community was predominantly Black and Roadville residents were predominantly White. Heath found that students in both communities came to school with a wealth of knowledge and literacies, but that they did not always reflect the middle-class expectations and values of the school. She observed that several teachers who found creative ways to draw on students' background knowledge. For example, teachers created lessons on the topic of communication and helped develop "metalinguistic" skills that taught students how to think about and discuss their understanding of language with their classmates (p. 333). Teachers brought in familiar signage and advertisements from around the community, so students could read, write, and learn through a sense of play and ownership. Students learned terms such as "dialect, casual, formal, conversational, and standard" (p. 329). Throughout their language unit they became language "detectives" listening to a variety of speakers and keeping records of commonly used features (p. 328). They wrote for different audiences and read a variety of genres. Teachers described some of their methods as unconventional, but successful.

Cultural Approaches to Learning

There are many cultural approaches to learning. The teachers in Heath's (1983) study described above used a Culturally-Responsive approach (Gay, 2000) to teach language and literacy development. Culturally-responsive teaching offers a framework for teachers to "filter curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master" (p. 24). If teachers can approach

teaching and curriculum in these ways, they can be more prepared to navigate a hegemonic curriculum with diverse students. Esposito and Swain's (2009) study with seven Black teachers in an urban school demonstrates the pedagogical decisions and challenges teachers face in order to facilitate culturally-relevant and social justice-rooted learning experiences in their classrooms. Likewise, Whitney (2005) offers examples of culturally relevant teaching. She posits five ways to integrate African American Vernacular English in the classroom such as bringing in pictures, texts, books, and modes of learning that represent different styles, or sharing nonmainstream examples in teaching. Culturally-responsive teaching posits sociocultural learning, personal knowledge, culture, and background should be accessed to teach what Gay (2000) calls "to and through" the strengths of the students (p. 29).

New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995) reflect a similar critical stance in that it goes beyond mainstream, traditionally-academic ways to approach literacy as the only valued kinds of literacies. Pahl and Rowsell (2012) draw on NLS in order to understand literacies and language learning more broadly – as "artifactual, immaterial, and embodied." In particular, they discuss the natural spaces and artifacts children are surrounded by as tools and modes that shape meaning making and language learning. Pahl and Rowsell contend that items such as construction paper crafts, homemade book marks, or decorated purses serve as representations that everyone has a story to tell. New Literacies Studies reflect a culturally-responsive approach to writing because Black children can draw on a variety of ways to communicate that reflect and honor their family and home literacy practices. New Literacy Studies is an important literacy theory for Black middle-class children because they promote similar values of culturally-responsive teaching such as "using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performative styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant

to and effective for them" (Gay, 2002, p. 29). Children naturally draw on these elements as writers, so when teachers embrace these kinds of cultural approaches, writing can become more meaningful.

Bearing similarity to an NLS approach, Zoss, Smagorinsky, and O'Donell Allen (2007) studied the composition process of three high school students as they constructed plaster masks in their English Language Arts class as a form of identity representation. Zoss, et. al assert that art integration into the composing process allows for diverse and dynamic ways of meaning-making that move beyond paper and pencil writing. The mask activity allowed for the students to examine, reflect, and visually illustrate their perceived identities. Given the diversity of today's classrooms, teachers must begin to conceptualize literacy skills and repertoires more broadly. Inclusive conceptions of literacies that acknowledge culture and differences and the acceptance of multiple ways to communicate are thus important to understanding the writing of Black middle-class elementary students.

Writing Approaches and the Implications for Black Children

By gaining an understanding of common writing approaches, we may be able to learn what kind of writing instruction is typically offered to all children, and what the implications of certain writing approaches are for students of color. I used Ivanic's (2004) six discourses of writing to anchor a broad range of writing approaches used in teaching and learning writing. Within these six discourses I discuss research and literature that highlight implications of these approaches with Black children. This review helps illuminate instructional pathways and pitfalls teachers travel that either empower or constrain students' understanding of writing.

Skills Discourse

A skills discourse is rooted in a prescriptive view of language. Prescriptive approaches to language place a great deal of value and meaning in the surface level features and the usage of English (Milroy & Milroy, 2012). The idea of language prescription contends that there is a right way and a wrong way to use the English language. Mechanical features of writing such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure are seen as the necessary and most important skills in writing. Attention to accuracy and correctness are key. In a skills approach, it is the rules of convention and language patterns that govern writing and serve as the foundation of a skills discourse (Ivanic, 2004). In a national writing survey that collected data from 174 public and private school first through third grade teachers across the country, Cutler and Graham (2008) found "the typical teacher placed considerable emphasis on teaching basic writing skills, as spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation skills were reportedly taught daily, with a handwriting and sentence construction skills taught several times a week" (p. 915). The study suggests that most teachers equate writing with mechanics and conventions rather than larger structures of writing such as ideas, voice, organization of content, or even creativity and style.

Concerned with issues of equity and access, Lisa Delpit (1988), championed explicitly teaching students of color and children from low-income homes the skills necessary to be successful in school. Delpit argues that by not doing so, teachers leave students of color at a disadvantage because the students are not equipped to navigate a predominantly-White academic world, and participate in greater ways in society. In short, without a strong foundation of the same skills of White middle-class literacy practices, students are disempowered. Delpit's position that children of color must be equipped with the "culture of power" (p. 282) suggests

that students cannot wait on the education system to embrace what Smitherman (1994) refers to as an African American discourse style that reflects heritage language and dialect, but rather they should be taught the skills necessary to navigate the culture of power in order to have greater opportunities for success.

Demski's (2012) research on technology-infused writing initiatives also highlights a skill-based approach to writing. Launched in a California school district with fourth graders and a Colorado school district with fifth graders. Students used netbooks, a variety of writing software, and cloud-based technology to support their writing. Teachers reported higher levels of student engagement and writing productivity with the use of a software that assessed students' writing skills and offered suggestions for revisions and edits in real time. The technology encouraged students to attend to these areas in their writing. Additionally, teachers used the online platform to create authentic writing experiences that positioned students to author pieces and dialogue on blog spaces.

A heavy emphasis on skills, however, does not always help students become more effective writers (Coe & Gutierrez, 1981). Indeed, a skills-based focus allows students to become acutely aware of their mistakes, while leaving them few, or no explicit strategies to help them improve their writing (Coe & Gutierrez, 1981). Students can also begin to associate mechanical aspects of writing as the hallmarks of good writers (Seban & Tavsanli, 2015). Newkirk and Kittle (2013) draw attention to the sensitivity teachers must evoke in dealing with the vulnerability of writing: "When a child writes, 'My sister was hit by a terck yesterday', and the teacher's response is a red-circled 'terck' with no further comment, educational standards may have been upheld, but the child will think twice before entering the writing process again" (p. 22). Furthermore, when students continually frame their writing in contrast to teacher

expectations and mechanical errors, they are likely to develop an identity as a struggling writer (Collier, 2010; Kinloch, Slocum, Ressler, & Rish, 2009).

Creativity Discourse

A creativity discourse, like the skills discourse, also places a great deal of value on the text itself. Thus, there is also a notion of what constitutes "good writing" in this discourse, but there is more attention to the aesthetics and style of writing. This kind of discourse asserts that good writers learn best by writing and playing with language and ideas writing on topics that they find enjoyable and interesting. In a creativity approach, one can learn to write from literary models and participating in language experiences (Ivanic, 2004).

Today, Common Core State Standards (2010) present constraints surrounding a creativity approach to writing. CCSS literacy standards privilege fact-based, argumentative, and evidence-supported non-fiction writing (Coleman & Pimental, 2012), which influences children's writing instruction and writing activities. David Coleman, author of the CCSS, criticizes the narrative and personal opinion writing in American high schools as excessive stating, "As you grow up in the world, you realize people really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think" (Ohanian, 2011). Diverse students receive this message when they do not see their culture, their language, their history in the classroom and have little opportunity to express their voice. Nathan (2015) counters Coleman's argument by highlighting the importance of fiction writing in schools that allow children time to write freely without imposed restriction and rules. He argues that fiction writing is important because 1) narrative and story are structures that children naturally understand and can build on to develop other writing skills, 2) it serves in the spirit of imagination and invention, which are important cognitive skills needed to solve problems and question the world, and 3) the writing qualities developed in fiction writing can be applied to

other genres. This narrative writing can affirm how children feel and what they think. Moreover, fiction writing can help children see or imagine who might "give a shit" about what they have to say now and in the future (see Ohanian, 2011).

Creativity-based writing can align well with the rich oral narrative language that Black children commonly use to express themselves to include humor, signifying, exaggeration, rhythm, and performance (Ball, 1992; Dyson, 1992; Heath, 1983; Smitherman, 1977, 1994). Dyson (1992) collected data on the literacy events of Jameel, a Black 1st grade student in a low-income school community. Dyson described Jameel as a "verbally skillfull child" (p. 10) who took pleasure in the poetry and lyrical language presented in books by Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein. In presenting his narrative to the class, Jameel used a combination of performance, rhyme, rhythm, and Black English. When he was challenged by a White classmate who saw his story as nonsensical and illogical Jameel became frustrated and experienced a loss of ownership in his personal story. Thus, creativity-based approaches reflect personal and cultural ways of writing and should not be expected to fit within academic boxes. Lastly, research shows that providing opportunities for children to write in a free-flowing way or creative way can help children become more confident and independent writers (Lannin, 2014; Menmuir, 2016).

Process Discourse

A process discourse is rooted in views of language that privilege both the cognitive functions of the writer as well as the writing event itself (Ivanic, 2004). Process views of writing purport that the writer moves through specific stages of writing to generate a piece of writing. For instance, the Flower and Hayes (1981) cognitive model of writing involves cognitive functions of planning, translating, and reviewing. Planning is then broken down into generating, organizing, and goal setting. Teachers are expected to help students attend to many of these

processes as a way to teach writing as a problem-solving process (MacArthur & Graham, 2016). This cognitive model remains influential in the teaching and learning of writing. Today, students may understand this model simply as "the writing process" which includes steps to brainstorm, rough draft, revise, edit, and publish/share. Rose (1980/1994) argued that such an emphasis on rules and planning strategies ultimately served as a disruption to the natural flow of thought and composition. In his study, Rose found that both low- and middle-class college students who struggled with writer's block did not have the necessary heuristics to negotiate the writing process; the fear of doing it wrong led to them to freeze in hesitation. The process approach taken on by students in college is reflective of its popularity in elementary and secondary schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Cutler & Graham, 2008).

Cutler and Graham (2008) report that 72% of elementary teachers used a process approach combined with a skills approach (p. 912). The process approach was also routinely observed in Applebee and Langer's (2011) national writing study with high-performing middle schools. One popular method used to teach the writing process is the writer's workshop model (Calkins, 2014). Children are positioned as natural writers and authors who cycle through activities such as teacher-directed mini lessons, independent writing on topics of their choice, peer conferences, teacher-student conferences, and sharing (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). There is research to support that the writing workshop, in conjunction with a process approach, is successful with racially-diverse children (Flint & Laman, 2012). However, Lensmire (1998) critiques the writer's workshop model as a non-critical pedagogy that marginalizes students by focusing on voice as a romantic expression of a "pure" self that ultimately becomes molded by teachers' expectations of self-expression and power dynamics in the classroom (p. 265); the writing can no longer reflect the authentic self of the student.

Thus, teaching students to apply a critical approach in their writing is not explicit in a process approach, and can easily be ignored.

Overall, the process approach has the potential to teach children explicit writing strategies as they move along the writing process. A process approach can yield beneficial writing instruction for all children, not just students of color. However, focusing too narrowly on cognitive processes creates missed opportunities to make writing more meaningful, and in some cases, is not helpful for students (Rose, 1980/1994; Schneider, 2003). A genre discourse of writing presents similar challenges in that if it is the only discourse children take on, their understanding of writing can become too narrowly defined.

Genre Discourse

Ivanic (2004) asserts that genre discourse is less concerned with the cognitive processes that take place while writing, and more concerned with the writing event itself. Within this discourse, the focus lies on the characteristics and attributes that differentiate texts. It is important to recognize how the qualities serve different purposes within different social contexts. In elementary school, academic standards similar to, or in line with Common Core State Standards expect students to demonstrate mastery of genres such as informational, argumentative, and narrative texts (Coleman and Pimental, 2012). “Good writing” in a genre discourse is centered on appropriate and accurate reflection of the “linguistic terminology” and structure of the features within a certain type of genre (Ivanic, 2004, p. 233). Again, because of the dominance of genre as an academic standard, it is also likely that students may situate their perspectives of writing within a genre discourse.

From a Bakhtinian (1986) perspective, genre reflects a communication channel where children still have the freedom and flexibility to bring their own ideas and voice to a composition

(Chapman, 2006). Indeed, Rose (2016) purports that genre pedagogy is "liberating for both students and teachers" because it offers a way to discuss the different text features (p. 229). Crawford, Sobolak, and Mattix Foster (2017) highlight the importance of teaching genre with mentor texts in the elementary classroom. They outline several books that teachers can use to teach persuasive writing, perspective writing, traits of writing, use of sensory details in writing, and a variety of genres. In keeping with the use of mentor texts, Rothery's (1994/2007) genre teaching model begins with the "deconstruction" of a model text followed by the teacher working with the students to co-construct a text, and finally the student independently constructing a text (p. 230). A genre discourse offers children the opportunity to make connections and distinctions across texts, but it is not culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) unless a teacher builds on this approach by introducing sociopolitical, critical, and culturally-relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2000) texts within different genres.

Social Practices Discourse

A social practice discourse approaches writing and learning to write with the perspective that writing is situated within a broader social context. This view of writing privileges purpose-driven, authentic communication and is concerned with the writing event itself. This may include learning how to write for a specific purpose such as a job or to accomplish a kind of social goal. Breathnach, Danby, and O' Gorman (2017) studied the play among four- and five-year-old children in Australia shortly after a new national curriculum was rolled out. The researchers found that the children spoke negatively about classroom writing activities, and considered it an unenjoyable task, or "work" that took "lots of hours" to do (p. 447). Although the children expressed negative attitudes toward writing, Breathnach, et. al observed the children

incorporating and using writing in their play. This kind of writing reflects social practice writing. It is done in a meaningful and authentic context for a social purpose.

A social practice discourse is conducive to culturally-responsive teaching, but it does not always translate to culturally-relevant writing experiences for children. Participating in a letter writing campaign, creating a family heritage cook-book, or making a school brochure reflect purposeful, socially-rooted writing, but can reflect varying degrees of cultural-relevance.

Sociopolitical Discourse

The final discourse in Ivanic's (2004) framework is sociopolitical. This discourse overlaps with the social discourse in that writing is viewed as a social act, however a sociopolitical discourse is rooted in critical issues of power and critical literacy. It includes broader social and political awareness of writing discourses and ideologies. Writers embrace the idea that idealistic views of language and literacy are to be critiqued and challenged (Ivanic, 2004).

Ife (2012) created a "political writing community" where middle school students were invited to write and discuss "critical topics" such as gender, identity, race/culture, and ideals of beauty (p. 64). In the beginning of the school year, Ife noticed students expressed a disconnect between the pleasure and freedom they found in out-of-school writing in comparison to in-school writing. Ife created a sense of community in the writing classroom by "welcoming student voice, initiating student interest, honoring student voice, and facilitating writing assignments" (p. 64). Students wrote identity poems, completed free writes, and challenged each other in dialogue sessions. Poetry has also been documented as way for children to address critical issues in writing (Damico, 2005; Schlessman, 2010; Tropp Laman, 2012). For elementary children, sociopolitical writing and dialogue represent social agency, activism, and action (Freire, 2000).

For instance, McCarthey (2001) found that when given an opportunity to read or compose written responses to multicultural texts and topics of racism in school, Carmen, a Black fifth grade girl, participated more by sharing her views, and making connections with characters.

The importance of discourse is similarly illustrated in Godley and Loretto's (2013) study on classroom discourse during a three-day English unit in which students constructed counter-narratives on language, race, and identity. The study took place in a predominantly Black, low-income, urban high school with a White English teacher. Godley and Loretto found that the students pushed back on negative language stereotypes that positioned speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as "ghetto" or "ignorant" (p. 323). They dissected the implications of what it meant to "talk White", or "talk Black" (p. 323). Students expressed the need for code-switching, while also acknowledging pride in their identity as a speaker of AAVE and their ability to understand and use multiple dialects.

As illustrated in the studies above, a sociopolitical discourse teaches writing through dialogue, debate, and discussion. Identity and power dynamics are examined and applied to real-world issues. By understanding writing in a sociopolitical approach, students learn more than academic content, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world. A sociopolitical approach to writing opens a space for students to critically examine social issues and affirm their identities.

In summary, Ivanic's (2014) six discourses of writing reflect what Healy and Merga (2017) describe as social, cognitive, and affective ways children experience and engage with writing. Each discourse has implications for how a student understands school writing. A skills discourse may lead to the understanding that academic writing is formal, governed by rules, and essentially voiceless, whereas a sociopolitical discourse may help students understand writing as

a personal tool to influence the world. Because Black students are negotiating a hegemonic schooling system that creates inequitable experiences, it is important to learn about the discourses of writing they are adopting to determine if they inhibit or invite critical education. For instance, the Institute for Education Services (IES) (Graham, et al., 2012) recommend four instructional practices that should guide U.S. teachers in their writing instruction:

> 1) provide daily time to write
>
> 2) teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes
>
> 3) teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word, and
>
> 4) create an engaged community of writers. (p. iii)

These recommendations should be expanded to explicitly call for critical or sociopolitical approaches to writing. It is clear that national writing policies and curriculum standards are not guided by the needs of diverse students. Teachers will need to be intentional concerning critical, authentic writing opportunities crafted in the classroom.

Children are actively shaping their writing discourses daily for better or worse. In the following section, I describe how children perceive writing and the influences teachers, parents, and peers have in that process.

Children's Perceptions of Writing

The early work of Clay (1975) introduced the writing of young children as purposeful, meaningful, and an important part of cognitive development. Clay's research on the scribbled marks and drawings of five-year-old children helped position young children as writers in the field of literacy and illuminated the cognitive processes behind their writing. Indeed, children

begin their journey as writers early in life, and as a result begin to develop perceptions and dispositions toward writing from a young age.

School is a significant factor in shaping children's perceptions of writing and how they view themselves as writers (Collier, 2010). Compton-Lilly (2014) used longitudinal case study to understand the process of writer development for Peter, a young Black boy from a "high-poverty community" (p. 372). Compton-Lilly began her research while employed as Peter's first grade teacher. For ten years, as Peter moved through elementary, middle, and high school, Compton-Lilly met with Peter to conduct interviews, collect writing samples, and observe in his English classes. She found that in elementary school Peter associated being a good writer with being a good student: demonstrating positive and good behavior, and following the school rules. Peter was considered a teacher-pleaser and had positive relationships with his teachers in elementary school. He enjoyed writing and telling stories and viewed writing as a significant part of life and artistry. His positive identity as a writer and his dispositions toward writing were "intertwined" with his status in school (p. 380).

Likewise, Grainger, Goouch, and Lambirth (2003) found that children in first and second grade typically held more positive attitudes toward writing than those in third and fourth grade, with students in fifth or sixth grades presenting a combination of attitudes ranging from negative, positive, and indifferent. In particular, third and fourth grade children commonly described writing as "boring" and expressed displeasure toward timed writing assignments (p. 7). A common theme across all students was the love for narrative and choice writing, where students were free to create their own stories. Grainger et. al (2003) position the discrepancy in children's attitudes toward school writing and their compliance as playing the writing game (p. 8). Noticeably absent from the study were children's views of writing as a means of learning. Noting

the ways children described writing, the authors questioned whether students only move through the motions of writing because they are asked or told. In essence, the question remains do children understand writing in the context of greater purposes?

Children's perception of writing is also shaped by their perceived skills and abilities. Research suggests that as children develop an understanding of writing, they also form identities of themselves as writers (Collier, 2010; McCarthey, 2001) and are often acutely aware of their competency levels as well as their peers (Lassonde, 2006; McCarthey, 2001). Because of the sensitivity and vulnerability involved in writing and identity, children need positive, confident, and culturally-affirming experiences with writing.

Influences of a Child's Social Network on Writing

Teachers, parents, and peers are all part of the network that can create richer, more complex, and more positive perceptions of writing. Below, I describe how each group plays a significant role in a child's understanding of writing.

Teachers

Teachers themselves, much like the diverse learners they face, embody a multitude of beliefs, experiences, biases, and ideologies. They are individuals. Therefore, as students learn to write from a myriad of teachers over the years, their experiences have the potential to look dramatically different from classroom to classroom. In particular, I review the research and literature that addresses teacher attitudes, beliefs, and motivation toward writing.

To understand how teachers think about writing, it is important to think about the concept of self-efficacy. The extent to which a person believes they can effect change or accomplish a task is known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994). Specifically related to teachers, Guskey and Passaro (1994) define teacher-efficacy as, "the teacher's belief of conviction that they can

influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated (p.628). One's self-efficacy may range from high to low according to different tasks or challenges presented. In a study to determine factors that affect the self-efficacy in writing instruction, Al-Bataineh, et al. (2010) found "insignificant or negative personal writing experiences", "insufficient training for teaching writing", "absent or inconsistent guidelines for writing", and "pressure from the school environment" emerged as common themes that negatively impact writing instruction (pp. 444-445). These themes point to situations in which teachers reflected on past writing instruction and experiences as dull, frustrating, or mediocre. Teachers also expressed sentiments that they were not adequately prepared to teach writing or felt there was simply not enough time in the schedule.

Apprehensive attitudes toward the act of writing reflect various forms of disinterest, low self-efficacy, and anxiety. This is problematic for students on the receiving end of instruction. There is research to support that teachers who experience higher degrees of writing apprehension require their students to write less than teachers who perceive writing favorably (Claypool, 1980). As previously discussed, a teachers' own elementary and secondary experiences with writing come to bear in their adult attitudes and efficacy toward writing instruction (Lortie, 1975). The cultivation of these beliefs may also be rooted in the preparation gained (or not gained) in teacher education programs (Darling Hammond, 2006; Grossman, Schoenfeld, & Lee, 2005). Unfortunately, many elementary school teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

A firm foundation in pedagogical content knowledge is required and critical for student achievement (Grossman, Schoenfeld, & Lee, 2005). Moreover, courses that deal exclusively in writing methods and pedagogy are not typically offered in teacher education programs. Rather

this content is embedded in language arts or English methods courses. Because teacher candidates have limited access to courses that allow them to deeply explore the teaching and learning of writing and writing instruction, they often rely on strategies or instructional practices they themselves received as a student (Lortie, 1975). Lortie contends than an "Apprenticeship of Observation" allows teachers to draw from their own K-12 teachers to guide them in instructional and decision-making practices.

Aside from personal writing attitudes or pedagogical knowledge, Godley, Sweetland, Wheeler, Minnici, and Carpenter, (2006) posit that a teacher's cultural sensitivity and understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students also informs the support and instruction student. As an example, Cunningham (1976-1977) found that students with nonmainstream dialects were corrected by their teacher 78% of the time, while students with a privileged, mainstream dialect were only corrected 22% of the time. A teacher's personal, professional and philosophical beliefs about writing and children shape the kind of writing activities children participate in, the ways in which children come to understand writing, and how they see themselves as writers.

Parents

Research shows that Black middle-class parents play a significant role in shaping their child's education (Baker, 2013; Caldas, & Cornigans, 2015; Lacy, 2007; Lareau, 2003; Patillo, 2013; Vincent, Ball, Rollock, & Gillborn, 2013; Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn; 2013). The advice, encouragement, guidance, support, and teaching that parents provide at home are critical. In *Raising Black Children Who Love Reading and Writing*, Glenn Paul (2000) calls for proactive and vigilant parenting of elementary-age Black children, asserting the rights for Black children to receive an equitable, high-quality, and critical education. Glenn Paul argues that "Limited access

to knowledge secures the widening line of bifurcation between middle-class Blacks and those who are poor" (p. 73) and that it is necessary for Black children to have access to things like computer technology and multicultural children's literature, both of which enhance literacy experiences for children.

Parents themselves are also an effective resource in the teaching and learning of writing with children (Aram, 2010; McTavish, 2007; Swindell Robinson, 2007). Early literacy skills are shaped by parent involvement at home as parents spend time engaging in a variety of literacy practices. It is not surprising that studies show that children in middle-class families tend to be more prepared in terms of the early literacy skills that reflect traditional schooling expectations than children from working-class or low-income families (Baker, 2013; Heath, 1983; McCarthey, 1997; Smith & Dixon, 2001). Zurcher (2016) argues that children from all backgrounds can gain access to successful writing experiences if parents spend time assisting with writing in the classroom. Parents are thus a significant part of a child's writing development (Warren & Young, 2002). However, it is the peer group that surrounds a student for hours on end each day.

Peers

Research shows that peer groups can influence a student's experiences, interactions, and self-perceptions with writing (Chapman, 2006; Collier, 2010; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). This is not surprising given that elementary students spend a great amount of time amongst their peer group each day in school. Peers represent an audience with whom a student often receives similar writing instruction, engages in conversation and discussion on writing and writing topics, and participates in writing activities and assignments within the classroom. The peer group can be considered a part of a child's writing social network.

One way that children often collaborate on writing is what Topping and Ehly (1998) describe as *Peer Assisted Learning*, or PAL. Peer Assisted Learning includes activities such as peer monitoring, peer assessment, peer tutoring, peer feedback, and peer education. In peer collaboratives like PAL, children work together to review each other's writing and offer ideas, suggestions, and feedback for revisions and edits. These interactions have been shown to have positive effects on children's writing (Hoogeveen & van Gelderen, 2013). Dahl (1988) found that peer feedback positively shaped the revision process for fourth graders who applied the peer revisions to help improve their work. However, Boon (2016) found children did not enjoy peer assessment because they did not see value in the process. Children felt as though they were only giving feedback because the task was assigned by the teacher, and they did not believe their peers used the feedback they provided. Additionally, students noted that it was difficult to critique others' work. Mixed reviews on Peer Assisted Learning activities point to the varied classroom contexts, teaching styles, and personalities and attitudes of the individual students.

As children observe and participate in the writing process with peers, they become aware of their own status as writers, as well as that of their peers. For instance, McCarthey (2001) found that children were able to assess their peers' writing skills and note which classmates were strong or weak in writing. Bourne (2002) also highlights this phenomena and calls attention to how the teacher facilitates a process of social identification by praise, lack of attention, and physical exclusion. In a writer's workshop model with predominantly middle-class third graders and some children who lived in trailer homes across from a higher-income neighborhood, Lensmire (1994) found children separated themselves along gender and social class lines. The middle-class children created their own social divisions and avoided partnering with children from the trailer park. In these ways, writing became a form of social exclusion and bullying in

which children wrote negative things about classmates into their creative stories. Thus, a peer group can provide support, build writing self-efficacy, or become a source of anxiety for children (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). Research that privileges student voice can help illuminate how a student's social network of parents, teachers, and peers influence children's writing experiences.

Student Voice

Schools function optimally as a closely-connected network made up of students, parents, teachers, community, administration, and district leadership. In examining which groups have privilege, power, or voice Joseph (2006) asserts that students are the "excluded stakeholder." They have the least amount of say in public education "systemic change processes" (p. 34). Cook-Sather (2002) argues "There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire [education] system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve" (p. 3). The lack of trust and willingness of adults to relinquish control to children is a common roadblock for the movement on authorizing student perspective (Cook-Sather, 2002). She states, "Historical images of and attitudes toward young people have helped to ensure students' exclusion from policymaking and practice-shaping conversations" (p. 4). Further, a mental shift is required within the field of education to purge antiquated ideas of a student's role in the learning process.

Joseph (2006) argues for dialogue as a strategic method to build a more trusted relationship between all students and other stakeholders to transform problematic issues in the education system. Although there are many examples of large-scale studies that seek student opinions (Beattie, 2012; Corbett & Wilson, 2002; Metlife, 1984-2012), few of the nation's 15,000 school districts independently solicit the opinions of students on their school experiences

(Dillon, 2010). A possible step in the right direction can be seen in the international college and school accrediting agency, AdvancED's (2011) recent survey protocol that requires schools to administer surveys to all stakeholders, *including* elementary, middle, and high school students. Their website states that the surveys are "not just collected for the sake of compliance", but to "prompt meaningful dialogue and decisions." (Advanc-ED, 2011, p. 2).

One study examined teacher-student dialogue. Cook-Sather and Curl (2014) describe the 20-year span of the Teaching and Learning Together project (TLT) university partnership that pairs preservice secondary teachers with high school students for the course of a semester to foster student-teacher relationships that positively develop teachers' pedagogies of care and humanizing approaches to teaching and learning. Through emails, home visits, and discussions about home and school life, teachers were able to develop a lens that enabled them to view students as individuals with special interests, opinions, and complex lives outside of school. A participating teacher in the study highlights the importance of listening to student voice:

> The student dialogues provided nuanced insight into the lives of students in and outside of the classroom. Most importantly, they made me think about students as humans, as real emotional and intellectual beings, and not just the audience of my profession. (p. 91)

Through the end-of-course reflection, several teachers in the study stated that they will respond to diverse children differently as a result of the partnership.

Certainly, research that aims to privilege student voice comes with challenges and ethical considerations. Khoja (2016) calls attention to the challenges in conducting research with young children. In her study of Saudi kindergarten children's views on the activities and experiences in their classroom, she invited children to draw, take photos in the classroom, and participate in interviews. However, her research proposal was rejected by many schools in Saudi Arabia

because her study was designed to conduct research "with" the children, promoting concerns over "credibility of research in which children collect data by themselves" (p. 315). Working with children can invite hesitation in terms of credibility, reliability and vulnerability. Children can be emotionally affected by the research process (Fine, et al., 2004; Oldfather, 1995), and they are also negotiating power dynamics. Khoja (2016) discusses the fact that when parents provide permission for their children to participate in a study, and children also agree, it is possible that children are only participating because they feel obligated to by their parents. Furthermore, there exists not only a researcher-participant power deferential, but an adult-child power dynamic that could influence the scope of the data. Although Oldfather (1995) invited the fifth and sixth grade children in her study to be co-researchers, Thompson (2011) asserts that this approach does not mean that students are also involved in the substantive reform processes. Student voice research and reform do not necessarily go hand and hand.

However, researchers and educators must continue to listen to the voices of students and understand their perspectives in order to effect change. Schaenen's (2014) *Speaking of Fourth Grade: What Listening to Kids Tells Us About School in America* is an example of a study that attempts to include students in such education reform discourse. Schaenen's research features interviews and conversations with fourth grade children across the state of Missouri in urban, suburban, rural, public, private, and charter schools to learn students' perspective on their school experiences. An insightful theme that emerged from her data was the shared and narrow perception of school. Most children expressed a belief that the purpose of school was to help them pass benchmark assessments, or help them get a good job when they are older. Schaenen asserts,

> It's *we* who have to decide if it's all right that young children feel that this is what they are doing when they get off the school bus in the morning – learning in order to score Proficient or Advanced on a test. (p. 16).

An education is more than passing a test. A child's future is not solely dependent upon a standardized score. If this is how children view learning, it is problematic and education stakeholders (including students) are charged with redesigning the system. Research on school writing and writing instruction has a place in this conversation because 1) the Common Core State Standards' focus on nonfiction and argumentative writing limits writing experiences for children (Coleman & Pimental, 2012), 2) the opportunity gap between Black and White students on culturally-dominant writing assessments perpetuates inequality in access and social mobility, and 3) the collective body of identity, voice, agency, expression, and civic participation that writing represents for students point to the need for more thoughtful education approaches to school writing with marginalized students.

While research with students can present challenges, when adults listen to children's views and try to understand their experiences, they can help them construct meaning. Researchers can go beyond listening, by crafting experiences for direct participation. Kuby (2013) applied a critical literacy pedagogical stance in the classroom to consciously pose problems to five- and six-year-old children in a summer program. She positioned her students as "co-inquirers" to address real-world events and by doing so created authentic opportunities for them to make personal connections and problem-solve.

Similarly, drawing on Dewey's theories of democratic education, Oakes and Rogers (2006) positioned Black and Latinx students as coinquirers to critically examine and challenge issues of inequity in their Los Angeles high school. Students used their inquiry as a platform for

agency and activism, making their voices heard in the school and community. Fine et. al (2004) crafted opportunities for Black students from low-income areas to take field trips to wealthier schools to collect first-hand data on school resources, academic courses, tracking, and patterns of injustice that coincide with race and ethnicity to explore the present-day effects of *Brown v. Board Education* (1954). The students analyzed their data and began to critique the education system for themselves. Other students presented their findings at forums with school faculty and administration. These research studies and classroom experiences reflect forms of student voice because student beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives are valued, heard, and then used to inform and shape their school experience (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Finally, Oldfather's (1995) longitudinal study of whole-language learning experiences in a racially diverse, suburban middle-class school Southern California illustrates how students came to take ownership of the research process when they were included as researchers. Oldfather began her study with a group of children in fifth and sixth grade that continued into their high school years because the children had become so invested in the project. Many of the children commented that the study gave them not only a platform for their voice, but an opportunity to discover more about themselves as learners. Empowering students as stakeholders has the potential for both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits.

Student voice is at the heart of my research. Therefore, I have chosen a methodological framework that fully embraces the voice of children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research paradigm reflects an ontological and epistemological framework rooted in constructivism. Researchers who study the social sciences within this paradigm assume that there are multiple ways of knowing and multiple realities (Merriam, 2009). They are interested in understanding how people make meaning of their experiences, and they draw on feelings, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of others or self as empirical artifacts as sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research is interpretive (Grbich, 2013), meaning researchers acknowledge their own subjectivities and how they come to bear on their interpretations and meaning construction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is often described as naturalistic because it is situated in everyday spaces, such as a classroom, or home where people engage in routine literacy events and practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Empirical data can be collected in natural settings where participants are comfortable. Students may feel comfortable talking and writing in their classroom, home, or other familiar settings. Qualitive researchers explore their research questions from the understanding that human beings are complex and multifaceted individuals whose lived experiences shape their meaning-making and ways of being in the world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

There are a variety of qualitative methodological approaches to explore the human experience. Case study, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry all seek to understand the experiences and stories that make up who people are (Merriam, 2007). Such qualitative approaches have origins in fields such as anthropology and sociology, but today they are used widely in a variety of disciplines (Riessman, 2008). One aspect that binds these approaches together is that of personal story and experience as a valuable data source and sometimes an exclusive data source (Merriam, 2009).

From the approaches discussed above, I chose narrative inquiry to guide my study. Narrative inquiry methodology is discernable from other qualitative frameworks in that it collectively allowed me to 1) position the participants as the narrators of their own stories (Rogan & de Kock, 2005), 2) address my subjectivities as a researcher and acknowledge how they are intertwined with the study (Riessman, 2003), 3) share power with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), 4) acknowledge their stories and experiences as a valid reality, (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), 5) build a relationship that moves beyond researcher and participant (Witherwell & Noddings, 1991), and 6) present the findings in a way that honors their stories and voices (Garvis, 2015). Together, these facets help discern narrative inquiry as a methodology that best aligns with the goals of my study and helps me to answer my research questions.

In my study, I aimed to explore Black upper middle-class students and their experiences and beliefs surrounding school writing. Because the voices of the Black children and their stories are the epicenter of this research, a narrative inquiry methodology complements the purpose of my study. Critical race theory (Bell 1992; 1995; Crenshaw 1988; 1995; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998 & Solorzano, 1997; 1998) and sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) inform my data analysis. Both of these theories allowed me to highlight the stories of those students who have been historically-marginalized and underrepresented in education research. Research shows that when students are given the opportunity to make their voices heard, they become more socially-conscious and challenge the status quo (Fine et. al, 2004), offer counter narratives (Godley and Loretto, 2013; Owens, 2016), and participate in social justice action (Kuby, 2013; Vasquez, 2001a; 2001b).

I hope my study plants these seeds of empowerment for the participants in my study. Beyond the study, I hope parents, educators, researchers and policy-makers listen to the voices of these children and come to understand the ever-present role of race in the classroom for children and the intersecting class dynamics that shape their experiences with school writing. In this study, Black upper middle-class children and their personal experiences formed the heart of the research. Riessman (2003) asserts that "storytelling has fostered the development of communities of action" and presents the opportunity to effect change for those willing to listen (p. 332). Thus, it was important to first acknowledge and understand the stories of Black middle-class children in order to identify the challenges and successes concerning how they experience school writing. Therefore, the following questions guided my study:

1) What beliefs are held about school writing by Black upper middle-class children?
2) What are the personal experiences that resonate with them as they develop their understanding of what it means to write for school purposes?
3) How do sociocultural factors such as culture, school setting, and the broader education system shape their experiences with school writing?

To address these questions, I first describe how narrative inquiry methodology served as the framework for data collection and analysis in this research study. From there I describe my research design, which includes the recruitment process and the context of the participants' school settings. My data collection and data analysis processes are also described in detail. Lastly, I address my subjectivities as a researcher and the limitations of the study.

Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin (2013) describes narrative inquiry as "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and

understanding" (p. 17). It requires the researcher to "be open to embracing their own memories, critical events, experiences, ideas, and feelings that intertwine our personal and professional lives" in order to further understand the experiences of the participants (Sisk-Hilton & Meier, 2017, p. 11). My own subjectivities, outlined at the end of this chapter, were indeed a part of this work. Memories, reflections, and experiences were carried with me as I worked with the children to construct a text that reflects their stories and lived experiences with school writing as Black middle-class children.

Although there are multiple ways scholars define and describe narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) theory of narrative inquiry as both "methodology and phenomena" (p. 16) rooted in experience is widely cited in the literature. Therefore, I adopted the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of narrative inquiry as defined by Clandinin and Connelly. They posit that narrative inquirers must approach the research process as relational, continuous, and social. These tenets are rooted in Dewey's (1938) theory of experience. Dewey believed that experiences were crafted by interconnectedness between continuity and interaction. Continuity is the idea that our experiences, interactions, and meaning-making are continual processes; they are residual and spill over from one to the next. What people learn "in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow" (p. 44). Continuity and interaction then are tools of experience. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) view Dewey's ontology as "transactional" because it shows the possibility for narrative inquiry to generate a "new relation between a human and her environment – her life, community, world" (p. 39). Narrative inquiry work has the potential to shape the participants' and the researcher's future experiences and life stories (Clandinin, 2013).

Below, I outline Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) tenets of narrative inquiry and how they guide my methodological approach.

Narrative Inquiry Is Relational

Sisk-Hilton and Meier (2017) posit that teachers can use narrative inquiry in the elementary classroom as a problem-posing and problem-solving process. In this way, my research within a narrative inquiry methodological framework asked, "What do Black upper middle-class students believe about school writing?", "What are the school writing experiences of Black upper middle-class students?", and "How do sociocultural factors experience influence experiences with school writing?" The inquiry into these questions was a recursive process; one in which some questions were answered, and new questions were generated as the research unfolded. The inquiry also reflected a space of partnership between the students and myself as we worked together to discuss, challenge, and explore their experiences and beliefs. I wanted to create a relationship where the children felt comfortable posing their own questions and sharing their stories. From a relational standpoint, it was necessary to make a concerted effort to build a relationship with the children. Witherwell and Noddings (1991) describe a "caring relation" as a kind of relationship necessary in narrative inquiry because it highlights the concept of self in relation to others. In other words, a caring kind of relationship is built on the idea that we are all connected as human beings. Witherwell and Noddings believe a caring relationship is bidirectional and establishes trust between the people involved. Through informal conversations and interviews that took place in the comfort of the children's homes, I established relationships of trust and care with both the students and their parents. Indeed, Clandinin (2013) argues that the relationship between the researcher and participant are most critical to narrative inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry Is Continuous

Conducting a narrative inquiry requires a continuous process of reflection. As a researcher then, I had to be open to re-visiting my own personal and professional narrative as I talked with and listened to the children (Strong-Wilson, 2006). Narrative inquiry is thus continuous because it involves an ongoing process in which experiences in an inquiry shape and inform future experiences (Clandinin, 2013, p. 41). The role of continuity in narrative inquiry functions as an affordance because it allows memory and memoir to enter the space of inquiry as experiences (Sisk-Hilton & Meier, 2017).

Witherell and Noddings (1991) assert that our lives become a collection of stories that represent our perceptions and "invite us to come to know the world and our place in it" (p. 13). While the concept of story is central to narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2013) further argues that narrative inquiry does not consist of a researcher simply listening to others tell their story, writing it down, and then retelling it. Instead, she identifies the key terms "living, telling, retelling, and reliving" as the processes that should occur in conducting a narrative inquiry (p. 34). Living and telling involve the participants living out their lives and telling stories about it. Retelling is "coming alongside the participants and then inquiring into the lived and told stories" (p. 34). It is in this process that researchers may begin to retell their own lived stories as a result of the participants' stories. Lastly, reliving involves living the retold stories. This process reflects Dewey's (1938) theory of experience described earlier. As the participants and I engaged in the inquiry process, the element of continuity was highlighted because we both had the potential to relive and retell stories based upon the experience and knowledge gained in the inquiry. The inquiry became a tool for understanding the world going forward.

Narrative Inquiry Is Social

Lastly, the social role allowed me to draw on broader social, historical, and political contexts as well more local ones such as school, home, family, and community. In this way, narrative inquiry creates a space for deeper exploration and understanding of an individual's lived experiences. The social underpinnings of narrative inquiry invite an understanding of experience within social circles, spaces, institutions, and systems and how these come to bear on a child's experience. When educators, policy-makers, and researchers develop understanding from these stories, narrative inquiry becomes a powerful methodology because it serves in the "construction, transmission, and transformations of cultures" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 3). In other words, potential exists to change the status-quo.

Research Design

The study began in the summer of 2018 following IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval and culminated December 2018. Below I describe the methodological details of my research design. This includes: the recruitment process, participant description, setting description, data collection, data analysis, and the representation of findings.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

I used a combination of purposeful sampling techniques to determine the participants in my study. Purposeful sampling is being intentional with participant selection in order to yield "information-rich" data that helps address the research questions being explored (Patton, 1990). Criterion-based selection (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and network sampling (Merriam, 2009) also guided the selection of the participants. Because I was interested in a specific population, it was imperative that I deliberately recruited participants from that population. Criterion-based selection was one way to do so. Criterion-based selection was necessary in my study because I

operated with research-supported assumptions that factors such as race and socioeconomic status create an intersectionality that affects a child's experience in school (Delpit, 2002; Howard, 2010; Kozol, 1991; Lewis, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

The participant criteria included the following:

- Child will enter fourth or fifth grade in fall 2018
- Child attends a specific public school in a defined metropolitan region
- Parents identify their family unit as Black or African American
- Parents identify their family unit as middle-class or upper-middle-class
- One or both parents have a college degree
- One or both parents are employed in a professional, supervisory, executive, or entrepreneurial, and salaried position
- One or both parents make a combined income of approximately 3-4 times the average median income of the state; between $168,000-$224,000 (Department of Numbers, 2018)
- Family lives in a neighborhood zoned for their local public school
- Children attend the public school they are zoned for

It was necessary that the participants adopted the above identities for themselves in order to meet the criteria, and I confirmed this during the pre-screening recruitment process. Although the majority of children in the study came from two-parent, heterosexual households, this was not a requirement of the study.

I also sought children who attended schools with a set of common dynamics. First, the schools needed to reflect a high-quality, high-performing academic standing as determined by publicly-available state achievement scores. Secondly, each school needed to reflect a positive

public/community perception I used word-of- mouth in the community and websites like greatschools.org to determine this aspect. Third, the school needed to be situated within a zip code that reflected high-income households. These three factors are in keeping with the average middle-class or upper-middle class schooling experience in metropolitan cities across the country (Putnam, 2015). According to Zillow.com, the participants' school zones reflected an average home value of approximately $300,000-$600,000. The home values of the participants' neighborhoods reflected a range between $500,000 and upwards of $1,000,000. Lastly, I sought students who attended public schools as opposed to private schools because I wanted to align my study within a broader scope of education research.

By intentionally selecting participants from schools that matched the above criteria, I positioned myself to gain a deeper understanding of how sociocultural factors shape the students' experiences and perceptions of school writing. To that end, two children attended Preston Elementary, a predominantly-White school, one child attended Orchard Mill, another predominantly-White school, and one child attended Blue Lake Elementary, a racially-diverse school. My descriptions were drawn from ethnicity and race reports from the State Department of Education. Because the State Department of Education does not provide or make public annual household incomes of students, I relied on publicly available data from the Free/Reduced Lunch program and average home prices in surrounding school neighborhoods as metrics of income levels to gain an understanding of the socioeconomic status of the school as a whole. Figure 3.1 provides a comparison of the Free/Reduced Lunch data across the three schools that the participants attended. By using economic and school quality metrics as parameters, I employed criterion-based selection sampling.

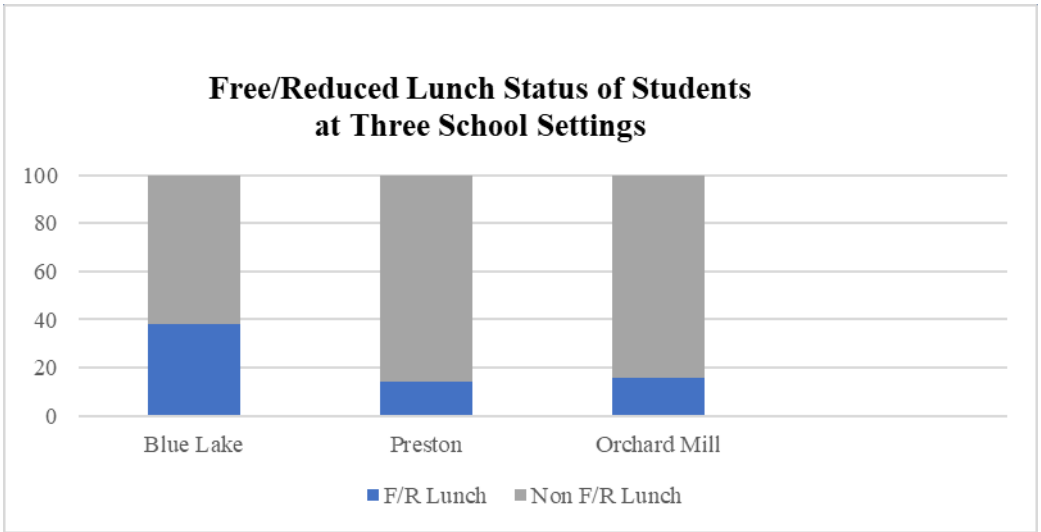

Figure 3.1 Free/Reduced Lunch Status of Students Three School Settings

Upon IRB approval, participant recruitment began in the summer of 2018. I created an IRB-approved flyer to assist in the recruiting process. It briefly described my study and listed the criteria and contact information. I shared my flyer in two ways: by emailing and texting it within a network of friends and colleagues with ties to the school, neighborhood, and community I was focusing on. My intent in sharing my flyer was not for my network to post it on their social media or hang it up in their school/community on my behalf, but to look at the flyer and determine if they knew families at the selected school(s) who may qualify as participants and share it directly with them.

Initially, I sought three Black middle-class children in fourth and/or fifth grade, and a combination of boys and girls. I focused on one school – Preston Elementary School which is located in a metropolitan area in the southeastern region of the United States. Preston Elementary was a high-achieving, reputable, predominantly-White, public school situated in a high-income area. Unfortunately, I received limited responses and some of the initial phone screenings eliminated families who did not meet the criteria. After recruiting one family, they volunteered to share the flyer with other Black middle-class families they knew at the school and reach out on

my behalf. At this point I employed another sampling method to help recruit participants called network sampling (Saldaña, 2016). This type of purposeful sampling meant I relied on the personal and professional connections in my social network to help identify possible candidates for the study. This approach included drawing on the relationships I developed as a former employee at one of the school sites and asking people in my network if they knew of children and families that might meet the criteria for the study. In the end, I was able to recruit two families from Preston Elementary. It became necessary to revise my design to include other schools in addition to Preston Elementary. Thus, I opened my study to include public schools similar to Preston Elementary, and expanded the study's geographic boundaries.

To locate more participants, I contacted the principal of Blue Lake Elementary School because of my past employment history with them and my professional relationship with the principal. I sent the principal a flyer and asked her to share it with any family whom she thought might qualify as potential participants. After speaking with her, I learned that while there were several Black middle-class families enrolled at the school, not many of them lived within the school zone, or in the local affluent neighborhoods that surrounded Blue Lake Elementary. For instance, I conducted phone screenings with three families who met the initial criteria, but each family lived in vastly different pockets of the city. Their children were part of the district's "School Choice Lottery Program" which allowed selected children to attend a different school outside of their designated school zone. Although the three children all attended Blue Lake Elementary and were considered Black middle class in other respects, their neighborhoods represented too wide a range of economic variance for the study. Due to these factors, I chose to eliminate these families as possible participants. I recruited only one child from Blue Lake Elementary. The family commented that they were likely the only Black family in the immediate

neighborhood causing me to once again expand my search for Black middle-class children who were zoned for, attended, and lived in close proximity to certain types of public elementary schools. I repeated my initial process of contacting personal and professional contacts with close ties to the other selected schools, neighborhoods, and communities and invited them to share the flyer with potential participants.

Thus, it was necessary to recruit participants from multiple schools because of the small sample size that existed at Preston and Blue Lake Elementary. I then shared my flyer with additional friends and professional contacts and once again widened the geographic location parameters. My final design resulted in the recruitment of four participants who attended three different elementary schools: Preston, Blue Lake, and Orchard Mill. Each of the students lived in an affluent neighborhood near their school and they were zoned to attend their public elementary school. Each family also earned an income approximately 3-4 times higher than the state median annual income, pointing toward an upper middle-class designation. The challenges with the small sample size at Preston and Blue Lake Elementary parallel research that describes Black families as a minority within the middle- and upper-middle class (Dorime-Williams, 2014; Reeves, 2017).

Setting

All four participants attended public elementary schools within a metropolitan region. The schools are settled in half a million-dollar suburban neighborhoods. Below I describe each school setting in terms of school demographics, surrounding neighborhood and community, and special features. I gathered the descriptions below from my personal knowledge as a former teacher at Blue Lake Elementary, research on school and district websites, city websites, and

discussion with parents in the study. One student attended Blue Lake, two students attended Preston, and one student attended Orchard Mill Elementary.

Blue Lake Elementary. Blue Lake Elementary School had a historical reputation for being a top-performing K-5 public school. Nestled in the historic neighborhoods of a major metropolitan city, it served a diverse population of roughly 800 students. It was the most racially-diverse school in the study. In 2016-2017, the approximate racial /ethnic break-down of the student body was as follows: 2% Multiracial, 11% Asian, 20% Black, 31% Hispanic[1], and 35% White. It is important to note that Blue Lake Elementary is distinctive in that in 2015 they participated in the district's rezoning effort to relieve overcrowding issues the school district. This resulted in Blue Lake temporarily hosting over 250 children that were bused across town each day to attend Blue Lake while their new school was being built. This rezoning brought about a culture and climate shift for the Blue Lake school and community. In years past, their Latinx population was less than 5%, and with the temporary rezoning, the Latinx population increased to more than 30%. Before this shift, the majority of students could be described as middle and upper middle-class families, with parents who were well-educated, working professionals, and less than 13% of students were eligible for free or reduced-fee lunch. The growth in the population of students in the Free and Reduced lunch program gave Blue Lake status as a Title I school, making them eligible for additional funding to increase academic support.

Blue Lake was one of the few elementary schools in the district authorized as an International Baccalaureate (IB) elementary school. The IB program is an international curriculum requiring a commitment to a rigorous approach to inquiry and global perspectives

[1] The use of the term "Hispanic" here reflects the language used on state government websites to describe population demographics in publicly available data.

(www.ibo.org, 2018). The IB program was one of many features that attracted parents to Blue Lake. In addition to the curriculum, Blue Lake offered a variety of enrichments such as art, science lab, music, technology, Spanish, as well as 30 minutes of physical education and 20 minutes of unstructured recess for students daily. These activities were made possible through a variety of supports such as the Blue Lake Foundation, PTA, the Blue Lake Aftercare program, and the annual auction. Students also enjoyed a plethora of after school clubs such as chess, golf, art, math, and Spanish.

Black students represented 20% of the school population, but many of them did not live in the immediate school neighborhood where homes range on average from approximately $500,000 to over $1,000,000. Several students lived in the nearby apartment complexes, or neighborhoods outside of the school zone. Since Blue Lake participated in the School Choice program, children who lived outside of the school zone attended through selection in the lottery program.

Overall, Blue Lake Elementary was a successful school with a community feel. Parents were attracted to the academic merits of program implementation and were highly involved and supportive. Students had access to positive academic and social experiences. The school culture can be described as racially, ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse.

Preston Elementary. Preston Elementary was situated within a sought-after independent school district. As an independent school district, the city had more local control over decisions and funding for their handful of elementary schools that feed into one middle school, and then one high school. Preston Elementary is located in a historic community just outside a major metropolitan city. The city's website invited visitors to "Take a stroll through the [community] and see how friendly neighbors, tree-lined streets, great schools, and playing fields, libraries,

colleges, and businesses, all make our town a wonderful place to spend some time." The community can be described as small, charming and artful, filled with locally-owned restaurants, small businesses, upscale boutiques, and a lifestyle that offers walkability and public access to transit. Homes in the area were similar to the costs of the Blue Lake community ranging from approximately $400,000 to over $1,000,000.

Preston Elementary served approximately 900 students. Its community can be described as predominantly-White and middle/upper-middle class. Preston Elementary School's race and ethnicity breakdowns from 2016-2017 were: 2% Asian, 5% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, 21% Black, and 66% White. As illustrated in Table 3, only 14% of children who attended Preston were eligible to participate in the Free/Reduced Lunch program. Because of this fact, Preston Elementary was not a Title I school.

Preston Elementary boasted a tight-knit group of parents who were actively involved in volunteer opportunities at the school and coordinated special school events such as the annual auction to raise tens of thousands of dollars for the school. One of the school's special attributes was that it was designed solely for upper-elementary students. Only students in fourth and fifth grade attended Preston, creating an academic environment often paralleled in private school settings that have the freedom for flexible age and grade cohorts. All students in the academy received their own laptops to be used at school, and each year fifth graders were invited to attend an over-night education field trip. As an International Baccalaureate School, Preston Elementary was a desirable elementary school.

Orchard Mill Elementary. Situated 15-20 miles outside the city in what can be described as a wealthy area, Orchard Mill was home to children and families from predominantly middle- and upper-middle class families. Upscale shopping, fine dining restaurants, and country

club amenities were all easily accessible and populated the residential areas. Nearby, visitors could drive past sprawling estates, golf courses, large suburban homes, and more homes that could be considered by many as mansions.

Orchard Mill Elementary served approximately 900 students. The racial and ethnicity breakdown was as follows: 5% Multiracial, 10% Asian, 13% Black, 13% Hispanic, and 59% White. Similar to Preston's racial demographics, White students represented the majority in the school by a nearly a 40% margin. Furthermore, 16% of Preston Elementary students received free or reduced lunch, which pointed to the homogeneity among students in terms of a higher socio-economic class.

Like Blue Lake and Preston, Orchard Mill parents were extremely involved in their children's education and had the money and resources to invest in the school. The Orchard Mill Foundation was created in recent years as a way to take in large amounts of funding and donations beyond what the PTA already raised. According to the school website, the purpose of the foundation was to "provide resources to all [Orchard Mill] students so that they may receive a diverse, state-of-the-art education that fosters accelerated achievement through enhancements in the curriculum, technology, and facilities." Throughout the year, the school hosted a variety of fundraisers and events encouraging parents and families to donate generously. One popular event was the "Fall Festival" hosted at the beginning of the school year to raise money for the foundation. Last year the school implemented a carnival theme festival that included a dunk tank, bounce houses, and carnival game booths. As a result of the foundation, the school was able to fund teacher stipends, grants, purchase innovative technology, and create a school science lab that offered all students STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) enrichment. Students could also take advantage of a variety of special-interest clubs like magic, STEM, and fine arts.

Table 3.2 below provides a comparison of the race demographics of students at all three schools. School setting information was important in analyzing the sociocultural elements that weighed into each student's school experiences.

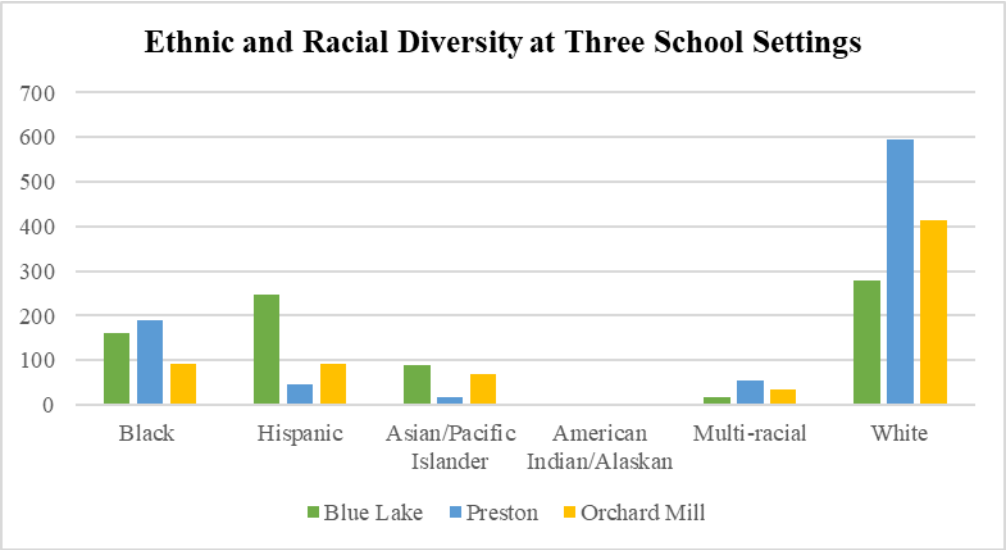

Figure 3.2 Ethic and Racial Diversity at Three School Settings

Data Collection

Children are a vulnerable population in academic research (Thompson, 2011). Power dynamics between child and adult, and researcher and participant could influence how children responded to me as the researcher (Punch, 2002), so it was important that my methods of data collection allowed children to feel comfortable sharing their stories and talking to me. I used a combination of research methods that are conducive to working with children known as the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001). The Mosaic approach seeks to empower children to take an active role in the research process and provide a new lens of understanding for the adult researchers. The Mosaic approach proffers *A Hundred Ways to Listen* to children's perspectives through a combination of "participatory tools" for children (Clark, 2007, p. 77). The tools I used in my data collection included interviews, conversations, drawing, and book-making. I offered a

platform for interactive online journals, but none of the students accessed the portal. Clark (2007) asserts that these methods encourage children to exercise agency and their natural abilities as "meaning-makers, researchers, and explorers" (p. 76). I did not employ participant-observation methods to observe children at their schools. Although participant-observation can yield rich insight, perspective, and context (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011), I relied on the tools I previously described because they all derived directly from the children's perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews served as the main data source to gain an understanding of the children's experiences. The nature of my research questions was designed to seek an understanding of Black middle-class children's experiences with school writing. Therefore, I employed a phenomenological perspective in constructing my interview questions as well as the method in which I conducted my interviews. Roulston (2010) states that researchers who take a phenomenological approach to interviewing "want to understand the participants' feelings, perceptions, and understandings" and that "open-questions are particularly useful in providing a format for interviewees to answer in their own words" (p. 16). In my research, a goal was to seek student voice, so it was important that my interview questions were written in child-friendly language. Children needed to understand what I was asking. Furthermore, my interview questions offered a flexible structure that allowed children to attain some ownership over the conversation (see Appendices A-D).

With recruitment complete, data collection began at the end of July/beginning of August. The initial interview session consisted of my first visit to the children's homes, introductions, obtaining assent and consent, and a getting-to-know-you interview with the child. Three subsequent interviews were conducted over the course of the first semester: One in August/beginning of September, one in October, and one in December. Additionally, I conducted

one parent interview in October (see Appendix E) to gather contextual evidence but did not include it in the data analysis. As the research with the students progressed, they affirmed my decision to keep the inquiry focused on their beliefs and experiences.

All interviews took place in the child's home. I chose to collect data in the fall because I anticipated that school writing in the spring semester would largely be geared toward preparing for the end-of-year state exams. I did not want my data to be skewed by assessment and format-specific written responses that children practice prior to written standardized tests. Although research shows that school writing experiences routinely center on standardized exams (Hillocks, 2002), I wanted to see what children might say about writing when they were not specifically preparing for assessments. By collecting data in the fall, I was able to understand contexts of children's school writing experiences that were not dominated by test-preparation. Indeed, the nature of time, place, and space yield different experiences for the participants and the researcher (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Before beginning the interview sessions, I sat with the children and their parents. I read aloud a third-grade reading level assent script to the children that explained the nature of the study and what the children were being asked to do. I discussed the components of the interview sessions, including a recorded interview and a book-making project that would we would work on together at the end of each session. I also informed them of an online journal platform they could use during the study. I made it clear that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Finally, I asked the children for their permission to study their experiences and stories with writing.

Once I received the student's permission, I invited them to work alongside me for. For instance, I encouraged them to pose their own questions, share their concerns, initiate topics of

conversation, and share anything they thought was relevant to their experience or the research study. Each student took advantage of this open inquiry process at some point in the study, but I needed to remind and encourage them to do so. I reiterated these sentiments multiple times throughout the study. I also put concentrated effort into building relationships with the children which is a tenet of a narrative approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I purposefully took time to share some of my own stories during the interviews to help to decrease the sense of one-way dialogue and the formal interview atmosphere.

To foster ownership of their role in the research process, it was necessary to create a space where conversation between myself and the child was welcome and authentic. Thus, at times interviews were delayed and tangents were explored to discuss Halloween costumes, new puppies, or weekend plans. I invested "interview time" listening with interest to plot details of the current books they were reading simply because that's what they wanted to talk about. Riessman (2003) contends that as narrative inquirers "We give up communicative power to follow participants down diverse trails." (p. 332). These moments were important in building relationships and fostering a sense of ownership in the interview process. In my years as an educator, I have developed positive, trusted, and respected relationships with hundreds of families. I believe this speaks to my credibility as a researcher engaging in a narrative inquiry with children.

In my time with the students, I also brought in some of the behind-the-scenes work I was doing at home. During the second interview, I briefly described my coding process and showed the children a visual of short coding themes that had arisen thus far among all participants. I shared ownership and power by bringing them into the research process and asking their opinion on topics and stories they want featured in their book project.

The book project occurred right after each interview session. I stopped recording and we worked on book pages for approximately 15 minutes. I chose to end the recording as a signal to close our formal interview, and to also give the children time to color, draw, select stickers, paper, and pens, and then write or draw. We also entered other realms of conversation not entirely relevant to the study. When students mentioned something that was relevant to the study, I would make a note of it on a sheet of paper. If a student spontaneously launched into a story about writing or race during the book-making, sometimes I asked them to pause so I could record it.

For each interview session, with the exception of one, students created 2-4 book pages (See Appendix F). Before each interview session, I prepared some reflection questions and a plan for the book-making process. The book pages included pictures, reflections, and decorated pages for their narratives. To make the book project a fun process, I purchased markers, stickers, and brightly-colored scrapbook paper with whimsical designs. I then guided the students in creating the pages, but they were free to design and respond to the pages as they chose. For example, during the first interview, students completed the following pages:

- A drawing that represented their feelings toward school writing.
- A reflection page answering 3-4 questions on the study and writing
- A decorated page for one of their stories

During the second interview, students created the following pages:

- Teacher vs. student perspective on writing
- Two decorated pages for their stories
- A reflection page

Students completed their final book pages during the last interview session in December.

My larger role in the student book project was to compile the student pages and add to it the narratives I developed from their interviews. I was also responsible for professionally binding the book with a company of my choice and gifting it to the students as a token of my gratitude for their participation in the study.

The book project was a significant part of the research design because it represented the voice of the students in their own words. The book is a tangible artifact that belongs to the children, as opposed to a dissertation product that belongs to me. The book featured their thoughts and experiences with school writing, as well as their drawings, photos, and writing samples if they chose to include them. It serve as a reflection of their co-inquiry research journey in the form of a keepsake item. The children could also use the book as a tool. It documented and empowered their voice, and they were free to share it with family, friends, and teachers to spark conversation about writing and race in the classroom. I had the books published in March through a printing company and shipped to the students with a hand-written thank you card.

Lastly, I offered the interactive online space *Voice Thread* per the website as a way for children to record their thoughts and reflections on school writing between the face-to-face interviews. Photos, images, text, and voice could all be uploaded in this space, giving children a multitude of options to share their thoughts. By providing an additional online space, I hoped to collect further data on the children's day-to-day writing experiences that occurred in the interim of our physical interviews. Each week, I posted a topic and an image. Similar to a diary or a journal, children could use Voice Thread as a way to document moments, stories, thoughts or feeling about what happened in the writing classroom on any given day. Like a focus group setting, if students desired, they could chat with other students who were participating in the study. During the introduction meeting with the children and their parents, I introduced the Voice

Thread platform and provided a sheet of guidelines and directions to set up a private account. I also reminded participants that this space was available throughout the duration of the study. Although I intended the online space to be another means of data collection, the students did not take advantage of this platform. I believe this was due in part to the logistics of their parents needing to set up the accounts and passwords for their children. Students did not have full ownership over this aspect of the process which placed limitations on their ability to access the platform.

During the final interview, I brought my laptop and showed students the narrative drafts I typed. I scrolled though the pages and explained to them that I had condensed all of our interviews into their personal stories. I told them how I made connections among things they said across all three interviews and put them together in one piece. I facilitated member-checking on certain points, and together we reviewed some of their stories for clarification and accuracy. For instance, I would read a section aloud, and ask "Is this what you meant here?" "These are my words, now these are your words. Does this sound right?" The process was important to ensure the final narratives were a "negotiated effort" (Rogan & de Kock, 2005, p. 644). I also asked a few more questions and recorded their responses.

Although my study was previously designed without the input of the children, I was able to share the inquiry space with them through our conversational style interviews, the positive relationship dynamic we established, and the narrative methods that recognized and valued the role of the participants in the research process. In this way, the inquiry was not simply about students sharing their stories, but it was also a chance for them to explore who they are as individuals and learners.

Data Analysis

The narrative form itself is a widely-held form of both data collection and analysis within narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995). To that end, there are multiple narrative analysis approaches (Riessman, 2008; Rogan & de Kock, 2005). Specifically, my approach to data analysis can be described as a thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). According to Riessman, thematic analysis involves examining the data to understand and determine the broader themes that span the participants' stories. Within a narrative thematic analysis, it is necessary to keep the stories intact, and in chronological order. This method differs from other approaches to narrative analysis where a researcher may break down the data into units and reorder them under a theme (Riessman, 2008).

Secondly, in a thematic analysis, the process of establishing themes may be informed by prior theories. Thus, I drew on the two prominent theories that undergird my study: critical race theory (Bell 1992; 1995; Crenshaw 1988; 1995; Delgado, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998 & Solorzano, 1997; 1998) and sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) to guide my analysis of the narratives. These lenses allowed me to examine students' school writing experiences in terms of identity, race, power and privilege, oppression, and life experiences. Additionally, I used Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing theory to establish a priori codes and analyze the data to understand children's beliefs about the teaching and learning of writing. Ivanic posits that there are six discourses of teaching and learning writing. I used this theory to establish six protocol codes and analyze data that referenced school writing specifically. Critical theory, sociocultural theory, and discourses of writing theory are conducive to the principles of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013) because each theory values individual life

experiences. Below I describe how the discourses of writing theory was used to code the data, my comprehensive coding process, and the representation of the findings.

Discourses of Writing

During the data collection process, I collected data on my participant's writing experiences and their beliefs and attitudes toward writing, allowing me to encounter collective patterns and themes in the way the students spoke about writing. Therefore, I drew on Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing framework as an additional theoretical perspective to code and analyze the data. Below I list the six discourses, a summary of its focus, and a sample of the data I collected that fit each code:

- skills discourse (focus: conventions, mechanics, grammar)

  "*You could have really good content, and there could be a lot of wrong spelling. But that would kind of mess with your content because other readers wouldn't be able to get what you were saying*."

- creativity discourse (focus: expression, language, imagination)

  "*I like writing because you can really just bring out the inner of yourself and put your own ideas into it.*"

- process discourse (focus: planning, drafting, revising)

  "*If you use a graphic organizer it helps you break all of that down into sections. You can edit it and then you can combine that on a new paper*."

- genre discourse (focus: modeling text characteristics and attributes)

  "*We only did author's choice once. And the others were like narratives, informatives, opinions. Informative writing and opinion writing – I do not like those because informative you've got to do like 30 minutes of research for like*

two sentences. And opinion – it's hard to convince people if you're not even talking to anyone."

- social practice discourse (focus: authentic or real-world application)
  "*That's my million-dollar project. It's really fun cause we had one million dollars. And so I did a cruise, a house, a college, a car, and charity*."
- sociopolitical discourse (focus: critique, politics, agency)
  "*So, when I was in fourth grade we sang We are the World. Our class was given a speech to write about something that was memorial. I wrote about how these artists came together as one to help people in Africa so they could have money to buy food and live.*"

In many instances, two or more codes were applied to the same data. For instance, I applied both creativity and skills discourse codes to the following excerpt: "*Sometimes I just like writing words, even though it annoys me to look at my handwriting. Sometimes I draw pictures to match what I wrote yesterday or the day before.*"

Discourses were a significant lens in my study because individual language and literacy practices are inherently part of the identities and discourses children adopt (Gee, 2012). For instance, students can develop a skills-based discourse of writing when they associate mechanical aspects of writing as the hallmarks of good writers (Seban & Tavsanli, 2015). These associations can form due to a myriad of social factors: the feedback students receive from teachers on their written work, the grades students receive in Language Arts, the exemplary texts a teacher models, or a parent's response to a homework assignment. While this is not an exhaustive list, each of these situations are couched within grander societal discourses that suggest what academic writing should look like (Ivanic, 2004). The six discourses were

important to analyzing the data in my study because they illuminated which discourses have become privileged by the children in their schooling spaces.

Drawing on this theory provided a lens to anchor students' experiences and beliefs about school writing. Ivanic (2004) asserts that each discourse is situated within comprehensive views of language that privilege either the text itself, the cognitive processes that occur when writing, the writing event, or the sociocultural and sociopolitical context that the writing takes place in (p. 223). It is important to note that there was room for discourses to overlap. For example, a creativity discourse privileges both the style and content of a text, while also placing significance on the cognitive processes that contribute to a thoughtful and interesting piece of writing. The discourses on school writing develop over time through writing in school, teacher writing instruction, parental guidance, and personal experiences.

A narrative inquiry methodology is congruent with both critical and sociocultural theories because it acknowledges the many and varied ways of knowing (Polkinghorne, 1988). It spans multiple disciplines and theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Narrative inquiry offers a way to illustrate the raw stories behind each theoretical lens I have discussed and connects those stories in a way that represent a fuller and richer picture of a child's life as a writer. For example, narrative inquiry encompasses critical-sociocultural factors such as teachers, family, school, race, class, curriculum, education standards of a child's life and explores how these factors come together to shape experience and form discourses of writing.

Coding Process

In a narrative inquiry framework, the data analysis process does not begin with me as a researcher, but with the stories and lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, I began data analysis with the transcriptions from each interview. The transcriptions could be considered

"raw" data in that they were not already in a narrative structure (Riessman, 2008). The data did not present naturally as stories, rather it was my role as the researcher to craft the participants' stories into a text where greater meaning could be derived from readers (Rogan & de Kock, 2005). In order to achieve cohesive story development, I applied two main coding schemes: protocol coding (Saldaña, 2016) and open coding (Charmaz, 2014). Protocol was relevant because my analysis drew from Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing theory, which proposes that there are six common ways people teach and learn writing. The six discourses were predetermined, and I applied those same categories to the data thus establishing a protocol for reviewing and coding the data. Additionally, Ivanic's framework was important to my data analysis because one question that guided my study is, "What beliefs about school writing are held by Black middle-class children?" The combination of these beliefs created discourses and ideologies about the teaching and learning of writing.

It is important to note that not every line of text, or piece of data warranted a writing discourse code. For example, the excerpt below was not coded with any of the six writing discourse codes:

> *Well, I consider myself Black or from the African-American community but I think that I differ from other kids in the Black community. I'll go, "Well, I guess these kids are lower in class or they're kind of not as high as me." And then this year I was fortunate enough to have a kid in my class – a [Black] boy. I consider him almost the exact same status as me and I'm like, "Wow."*

For the excerpt above, I applied open codes such as *class*, *skin color*, *only Black girl in gifted program*, *identity as Black/African American*, and *class privilege*. However, this data did not

address school writing and did not fit into any of the defined discourse categories such as skill, creativity, or genre.

After a cycle of a priori coding, I applied open coding to the data because it allowed for more organic themes and concepts to be illuminated. Saldaña (2016) states "It is an opportunity for you as a researcher to reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of your data" (p. 115). Open coding allowed me to identify the themes and gists of children's stories in a succinct way that I later expanded upon. For instance, a participant spoke about the importance of technical writing skills across multiple interviews. Using a priori coding, I coded these snippets of data as *skills discourse*, which broke down into *handwriting*, *grammar*, *mechanics*, and *spelling*. Using open-coding, I applied more holistic codes such as *what good writers do* and *personal beliefs about writing*. By applying a sociocultural theory of learning to the codes, I understood the context surrounding the student's beliefs. By applying a critical race lens to this coding, I came to recognize a gap between the value of a skills discourse versus a socio-political discourse where Black identity might be affirmed.

After applying two different coding schemes, I then returned to the original transcripts. Guided with a list of coded themes and matching excerpts, I combed through the first interview and mapped out a getting-to-know-you portrait for each student. After the second interview was conducted, transcribed, and coded, I analyzed the second interview and returned to the first interview. I amalgamated data from the two interviews and fleshed out stories still guided by the initial codes and themes. New stories were incorporated as well. After the third interview, I repeated the process: I analyzed interview three and returned to the first and second interviews. If participants returned to a topic, theme, or experience they described in a previous interview, I extended the initial story. The recursive process helped me to review the coded data and

interviews multiple times and in connection to each other. I amalgamated the data and crafted several stories for each participant. As previously mentioned, I used both coding schemes to determine that a student valued technical writing skills and identified them as the hallmarks of good writers. Thus, a story was crafted to highlight her personal belief and her experiences within a skills discourse. The stories were organized chronologically and grouped together by commonalities as opposed to the consecutive order in which they occurred.

Once each participant's stories were woven together, I read them several times to determine the broader ideas, or "belief statements" (Garvis, 2015). In keeping with Garvis' (2015) concept of a narrative constellation,

> The creation of belief statements is created after a search to identify the over-arching statements that capture the beliefs, perspectives and values presented. Belief statements are created after the research text has been written. They are used as headings or titles to introduce the research text and provide important perspectives to the reader. Belief statements carry critical points to the reader, helping make the excavation and establishment of meaning possible. (p. 19)

I situated the stories in broader critical-sociocultural context as Bruner (1984) contends that narratives must be anchored by culture and societal realties. Thus, I analyzed the narratives within greater conflicts, and the nuances of stories that extend beyond the original coding themes. Figure 3.3. below illustrates the recursive process in which I 1) coded the data using two different schemes, 2) combined the coded data by themes, and 3) recursively developed and analyzed the coded data once more to determine the overarching belief statements which precede each section within a narrative constellation.

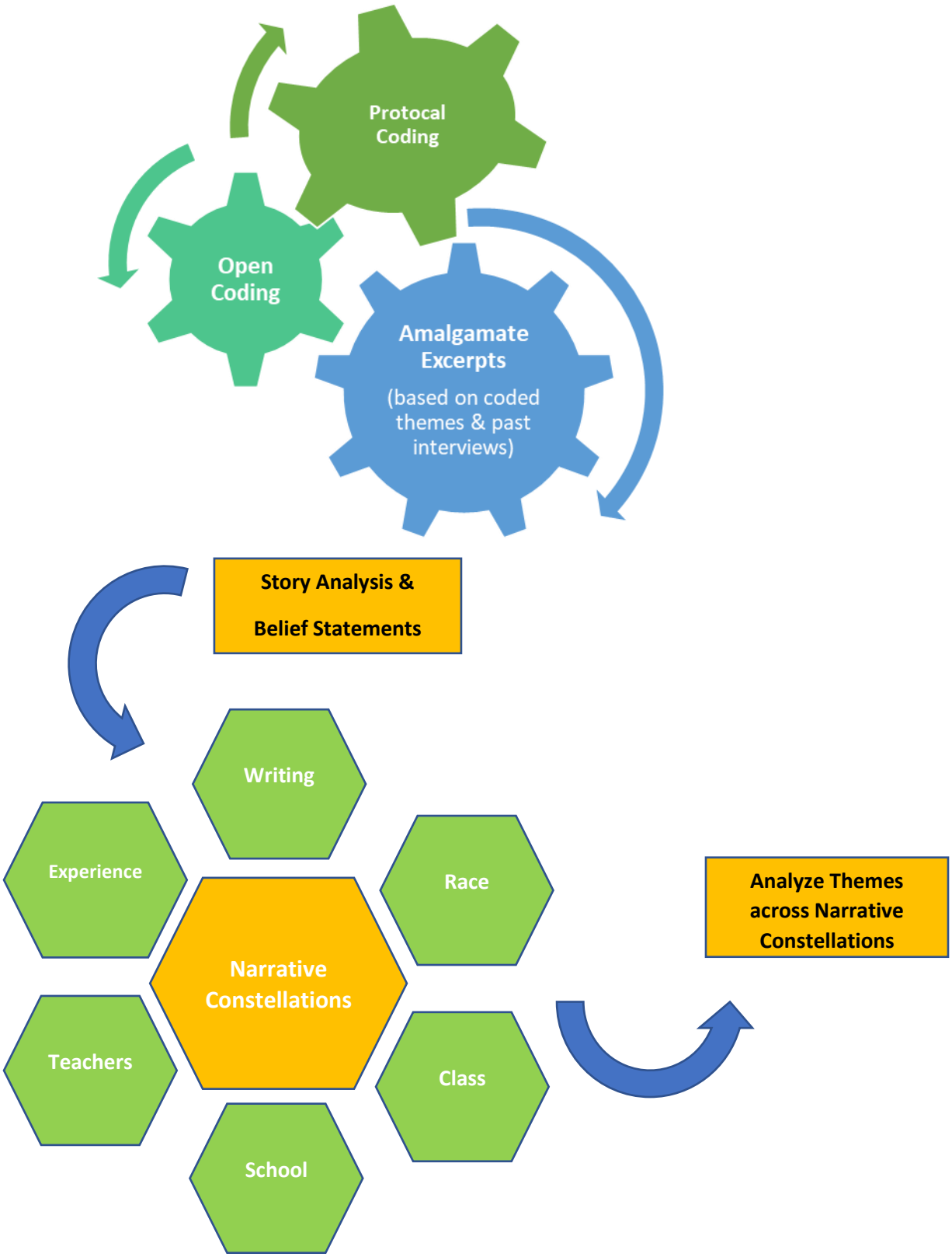

Figure 3.3 Data Analysis Process

Using this recursive pattern of analysis to form belief statements, I was able to form a narrative constellation for each participant. Narrative constellation is the type of text I crafted for each participant as a culminating document to reflect their stories and illustrate how they are connected (Garvis, 2015). Further discussion on narrative constellations can be found in the discussion of the representation of the findings. To form the narrative constellations, I explored the data and conducted multiple forms of analysis. When these processes converge to form concepts and themes, or new texts, this process is known as crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). For example, the dimensions of the inquiry should be considered using cross-connections and patterns. Ellingson contends that the researcher's position, the participants' ways of knowing, the epistemological framework, multiple realities, data collection methods, and representation of the findings all reflect principals of crystallization. Crystallization is significant in qualitative research because 1) it indicates that there are several data sources to support an idea and 2) it acknowledges the multiple ways of seeing and knowing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). The representation of how my study crystallized is the set of narrative constellations presented in Chapter 4.

My thematic analysis concluded with multiple readings of each constellation narrative. From there, I noted connections and similarities across the texts and determined the broader themes. Garvis (2015) maintains, "A good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary" (p. 13). Collectively, the narratives pointed to four themes. First, I identified the importance students placed on technical writing skills. Grammar, spelling, and handwriting were routinely positioned as a valuable and critical part of the writing process. Secondly, school writing was seen as a highly structured experience by way of standards-based genres and assigned topics. Students had little time for

free writing and teachers often controlled all aspects of writing assignments. Thirdly, teachers avoided critical/sociopolitical writing and discussion in the classroom which resulted in few opportunities for students to write about global issues or social justice. The final theme highlights the enduring invisibility and silencing of Black identities in school. Black identities are quietly ignored through a series of processes and messaging reflected in school culture and practice.

Representation of the Findings

My findings are represented in what Garvis (2015) describes as narrative constellations. Narrative constellations are presented as a cohesive narrative text largely in the participants' own words. However, in keeping with narrative inquiry, the researcher acknowledges involvement in the inquiry process. In crafting the narrative constellations, my voice and my words are present. Both voices help weave together stories that can be situated in broader sociocultural and historical contexts. "My voice becomes present everywhere – overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors and echoing through the central themes" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). In keeping with the spirit of narrative inquiry, I acknowledge my role, position, and subjectivities in the research as a I came alongside the participants in their own journeys of reflection and retelling.

Each narrative is made up of multiple stories that show connections, overlap, and patterns. These stories are anchored by "belief statements" (Garvis, 2015, p. 19). Thus, within each narrative constellation, there are several stories with corresponding belief statements about what is means to be a Black middle-class child writing in school. Like a constellation, the stories come together at points to represent the lived experiences and beliefs of each participant. Garvis's concept of narrative aligns with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) description of

narrative inquiry as relational, continuous, and social. A relational dimension was presented in the construction of the narratives with the children and the interview process. A process of continuous ongoing reflection was present for both the participants and the researcher in the retelling and reliving of the stories. Finally, the social dimension of narrative inquiry was present in the narrative constellations as a I situated the stories and experiences of children against a critical and sociocultural backdrop.

Subjectivities

In narrative inquiry, as in other qualitative research, it is appropriate to acknowledge the role of the researcher (Riessman, 2003). Indeed, I must acknowledge that I worked cooperatively and closely with the students in the study. I was not an objective party that simply collected stories. I challenged students to think, I pushed back at times, I introduced new concepts, and I shared some of my own personal stories. I brought my own background, beliefs, and experiences to the process and they were intimately intertwined in the narratives. As the researcher, I was empowered to frame and situate the narrative within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts (Clandinin, 2013). Because of my position as a researcher, and my perspective of the world, I was able to call attention to the critical and sociocultural elements that framed the student's narratives. Therefore, it was necessary to ask in the inquiry process, "What are my beliefs?", "How do I understand intersectionality?", and "What are my prominent stories concerning race, or school writing?" (Grbich, 2013). Below I outline my subjectivities.

I am from a mixed-raced family. My father is Black and my mother is White. My parents were in the Army and National Guard, so much of my childhood and adolescence were spent near military bases, which made for an ethnically-diverse makeup of surrounding families. I had close friends that were Black, White, Vietnamese, Filipino, Guamanian, and Samoan. Many of

their families also had military backgrounds. I have always valued the opportunity to be surrounded by a rich and beautifully diverse community. As an adult I seek out spaces that reflect similar representations. For instance, I chose to attend a Historically-Black University, my church is racially and ethnically diverse with many Black, White, Asian, and Indian families, and when I enroll my daughter in a school, I will seek out a setting that I perceive to be racially and ethnically diverse.

My parents have always talked openly and honestly about race since I was a child. My mom's family is from a middle-class suburb in Buffalo, New York and my dad's family is from a working-middle-class suburb in Memphis, Tennessee. Visiting my grandma's neighborhood in Memphis always offered what I recall as a rich portrayal of Black culture. I loved the people, the music, the city, the food, and visiting my extended family and cousins. Discussing Black and White cultural differences was common in my family; there was critique, humor, history, questioning, honesty, and plenty of discussion and stories. My parents shared their experiences with discrimination as a married couple, and my dad as a Black man. My brother, sister, and I always felt comfortable asking questions and voicing our opinion on race. My parents instilled a sense of pride in us: pride for who our parents were, our racial identity, our Black history, and an appreciation for both of our cultures. I share this because from the time I was little, race has been a part of my everyday life. I believe that all children notice and pay attention to race. It is the adults around them who determine the comfort level and safe space created to discuss it (B. Tatum, personal communication, October 2017).

I view class as subjective and nuanced; it exists on a spectrum. It is fluid depending on place and time. Looking back, I think I was raised both at home and in school with literacy values and practices that would be described as "White and middle-class." I accepted these

practices as normative ways of learning and doing literacy. Today, I recognize the multitude of rich, cultural, and varied ways of literacy.

Growing up, we were not rich, and I knew we were far from poor. As a child, I am not sure I could accurately describe my class status the way the children in the study do. My cousins grew up in low-income housing units, or what they called the "projects" just 15 minutes from my neighborhood with nice homes and good schools. The low-income housing neighborhood had its own culture, community, and ways of doing and being. As a teenager, I made keen observations of the socioeconomic and class differences in people and communities.

Overall, I would describe both my childhood background and my adult status as middle-class. However, the nuances of place and time make it difficult to define. For instance, as an elementary-age child, I was privileged enough not to worry about my socioeconomic status or money. My middle-class neighborhood, racially-diverse schools, and privileged academic dialect afforded me positive school experiences and social benefits. However, as a fourth and fifth grade student, my family would not meet the full criteria laid out in my study. Neither of my parents have a college degree, and their combined income was far below $165,000. As an adult today, I still consider myself to be middle-class. However, I do not earn the same income the families in my study did. Here, I point to the distinction between middle class and upper middle class.

In terms of intersectionality, much of my thinking about race and class were shaped when I began my career as a teacher. Most of my teaching career was spent in a public metropolitan school district. My school district had more than 80 elementary schools when I began my career, which was a drastic change from the 10 or so elementary schools in my home city growing up. Over the years, I had the opportunity to teach and visit different schools across my district. What

struck me were the vast differences present in socioeconomic status, race, culture, teachers, communities, and neighborhoods from one end of the school district to the other. I recognized the disparate opportunities and school experiences that existed between poor, working-class and middle- and upper-class families.

I began my teaching career in 2006. Since then I have taught hundreds of children and built relationships with several Black middle-class children and their families. I worked in school settings that were predominantly Black and middle-class, as well as White and middle to upper-middle class. I always felt that the experiences of Black middle-class children were taken for granted in predominantly White school settings; that their socioeconomic status overshadowed their race. The intersectionality of these factors is often ignored by teachers and schooling systems in general. Below I include some personal stories that have shaped the views I embrace in my research:

> *A group of my students, sweet third grade girls, are playing together on the playground. All them are middle-class. Three of them are White, and one girl, Corrine, is Black. The four girls consider themselves to be best friends. Suddenly, the girls come across a hair scarf that resembles a hair net. I have seen it before in Corrine's book bag. One of the girls picks it up and starts tossing it around, joking that someone brought a hair-net to school. Corrine laughs and joins in with the joke. She does not claim the hair scarf as her own.*

> *I am visiting a fourth-grade classroom that has just completed a unit on poetry. Children were invited to write about any topics that interest them. As I walk around the desks, each student excitedly shares their poetry book with me. I note a wide variety of topics: everything from soccer, friendship, food, and family. But it is the three Black girls*

in the class who stand out to me: each has written critical, political poems about Donald Trump. One has written a poem on slavery.

We are studying the Civil Rights Movement in a third-grade classroom. The team has planned an instructional unit that involves reading historical-fiction novels, watching videos, and writing reflections. We are set to watch a movie on Ruby Bridges and have the students write reflections afterward. The video includes scenes with protestors yelling racial slurs and discriminatory language toward Ruby as she enters the school. The students will write a reflection after they watch the movie. Later during recess, my coworker, (a White woman) expresses that she had to "fast-forward" those scenes because they are "inappropriate" and "too scary" to share with the students.

Each of these stories reflect moments of voice for Black children. Whether voice is silenced, ignored, or boldly expressed can be understood in cultural and historical contexts and facilitated by teachers in the writing classroom. I share these stories to highlight the importance of critical and sociocultural theory, as well as narrative inquiry, in shaping my lens of the world. Sisk-Hilton and Meier (2017) state, "Wrestling with our personal and professional memories around a particular teaching and learning puzzle often takes us on an unexpected journey of remembering, reflecting, and changing" (p. 11). My journey in the Ph.D. program afforded opportunities to be immersed in academic literature and research. Here, I came to understand the challenges concerning school writing in elementary school, and the exclusion of ethnically and linguistically diverse students from the writing curriculum.

Writing is a personal act. It's not simply a way to express yourself or complete school assignments. If the teaching and learning processes impose structure that limit criticality, voice, sociopolitical consciousness, and language, then children's identities are also restricted to

performing a certain kind of school identity (Gee, 2014). These are the experiences and beliefs I carry into the research that make up my subjectivities.

In Chapter 4 I present the narrative constellations of the participants. Through this collection of personal stories, others may come to understand the school writing experiences of four Black upper middle-class children.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE CONSTELLATIONS

Stories illustrate the core of who we are. They represent and affirm our lived experience and shape who we become. I am honored to present the stories of Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin. Presented as narrative constellations (Garvis, 2015), each narrative includes a dynamic collection of personal stories. This inquiry explored students' school writing experiences and the connections to race, socioeconomic status, learning environment, and school setting. As a joint inquiry, my words as the researcher are in regular font, while direct quotations from the children are italicized.

Meet Taylor

I meet Taylor and her family on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, for the first of our four interviews. I drive up to a quaint craftsman style bungalow with a big front porch. A flag for the city's soccer team waves in the breeze. I am greeted warmly by Taylor's mother at the front door and she leads me down a hallway that opens to a dining room, living room, and kitchen. I quickly scan the house and note the rich, dark hardwood floors, the craftsman style architecture and the open, yet cozy feel to the home. I comment on the beauty of the home to Taylor's mom. Later in the afternoon, her mom, an attorney, shares that they underwent a remodel a few years back and extended the upper level of the home. Taylor's dad, a behavioral scientist, was out running errands. As I enter the kitchen, I find Taylor and her sister at the dining room table eating a snack. They are both in dresses, and I am assuming they recently returned home from church.

Taylor, an 11-year old fifth-grader is a beautiful shade of mahogany. She stands at nearly my height, of 5'1. I know, because her mom makes a comment about her height in relation to mine and at one point we briefly stand face to face to assess. Her natural black hair was in

several tiny braids that fell just below her shoulders. As I walk further in, I am excited to meet Taylor. I smile and extend my arm to shake her hand, saying “Hi Taylor, I’m April.” She meets my eye contact with a little smile, a polite hello, and a confident handshake. I smile and shake her sister’s hand as well. We get situated at the dining room table and I begin to go over the details of the study. Taylor neatly puts her un-finished tangerines in a napkin and moves them to the side, seemingly ready to focus on the task at hand.

Taylor describes herself as caring, funny, smart, and competitive. She is confident in her academic abilities and intelligence as demonstrated by her success in school and her membership in the school’s gifted program, Excel. She is *not very good at explaining what Excel is, but it’s like all of the children that learn in a different way. Like we’re called out-of-the-box thinkers. We’re all really, really, exceptionally smart. I am the only girl with my skin color in my Excel groups. There's also Mila who is Korean in my group. There's not as much diversity. I'd say that there's more like, Pacific Islander type of thing in Excel. And then just normal, I guess, Caucasian*. Taylor is not sure why there aren’t as many Black students in the gifted program. *I guess it's kind of weird*.

Taylor enjoys school and ranks in the top percentiles of her standardized test scores. She shares that she *has always been really, really smart. My mom said that when I was in Pre-K, I was in a class where there was a lot of kids just coming to America and they were learning the language and she said that I was like the teacher’s assistant. While everyone was on the carpet learning the lesson, I would have already known it and I would be sitting on the couch watching the lesson. That was one of the reasons why I went to Montessori private school*.

Taylor is an avid and voracious reader and excitedly launches into the details of most books that we happen upon in conversation during our interview. She often shares whether she

has the book upstairs in her room, or on her Kindle. Recently, she participated in a summer book club. *It's fun. There's a bunch of different girls that go to my school. We're all going into fifth grade and we read each book each week and we talk about the book together. This week I'm reading a book that's like this thick.* Taylor holds up her thumb and finger, referencing the children's novel, *The Land of Stories* (Colfer, 2012). It would not be surprising to find Taylor sitting contently reading a book at school, turning down her friends' requests to play. *My friends kind of got upset with me because I was all into the book. Like I would sit down at After Care and sit with the book open on my lap and my friend, Alexis, would be like, "Come on, let's go play cars." And I'm like, "After I finish this chapter." And later I'd be like, "Yeah we can play tomorrow."*

Taylor humbly accepts the "s*occer-mom*" label her friends have bestowed upon her. She feels it's fitting as she is caring, kind, and always looking out for everyone, *doing everything*. She is the center back and *in charge of the field* so it is appropriate. Taylor is a busy girl but seems to handle her schedule with a certain maturity level. In addition to soccer, Taylor also does ballet. *This year I almost had to give up ballet because soccer's now three days a week and ballet is two days a week and one of them overlapped. And I have soccer carpool. So we all get together and on the overlapping day I wouldn't be able to go through soccer car pool and I wouldn't be able to eat before I went to soccer. I'd have to like snack from ballet going to soccer.* The possibility of missing out on ballet *almost took away that part of me. Which would have been very sad for me because I love ballet*. Taylor gets her homework done in the After School Program that offers outdoor play, crafts, games, and enrichment activities such as cooking, sewing, and Legos. *Soccer isn't until six-ish and ballet isn't until six. So I have After School for like two to three hours. I'm there a lot.* This year *I did have to give up one thing that I love. I do*

Girls on the Run. And I had to give that up. After the soccer season ended, Taylor joined a basketball team. During the first game, *I was the only one that shot a basket!* Taylor will do basketball until soccer starts again. Needless to say, she maintains an active and busy lifestyle.

During my interviews with Taylor, it became clear that she is insightful and reflective. As such, she is keenly aware of the racial demographics and nuances of her neighborhood, classroom, and school. She describes the before and after impacts of a demolished housing area nearby that once allowed a significant number of Black children to attend her school. *Across the street from us there was kind of a condo-y place where a bunch of the African-American children lived that went to school in [the neighborhood] area. And then that was taken down so they really spread out. If you go down the street, they're still building that. They've just now put in the plumbing pipes but there's still no building. So they've all like moved out*. Taylor and her group of neighborhood friends are part of a group who live in single-family homes valued at upwards of $400,000 and are not categorized as the condo/apartment residences Taylor previously describes. As such, Taylor highlights a sense of community as she discusses the *walking group* she is a part of: a small group of families that gather together to walk to the school each morning. *And my little sister, Sophie, is joining us this year for our walking group. So her friend Devin and her friend Noel who's moving into a new house down the street are joining us*.

Although another Black family is part of this walking group, Taylor describes her personal friend group as *mainly* White. *Except for like, I have a third-grade friend who is LaToya and I've known her since then. And she's African-American. And then I also have a lot of friends that are Asian Pacific Islander. Though, in the whole entire school I'd say there's more Caucasian than anything and more like Pacific Islander-Asian. But there is also a lot of African-American. And in my class African-American-wise there was two girls and two boys*. Taylor

seems to note and notice the exact number of Black students in her class at any given time. She explains that, throughout the school year, *we lost a lot of people and gained a lot of people during that year. One of the two girls that came was African-American. And then one of the boys that left my class was African-American.*

It would not be surprising to find Taylor in deep conversation with her teachers, librarian, or even the principal. She is articulate and reflective, oftentimes two steps ahead of me in the interview, filling in the gaps in anticipation of what my follow-up question might be. While Taylor is not entirely sure about her plans for the future, she has narrowed down some career fields. *When I was littler I wanted to go to a vet university thing in Denver. I played a game with my friend, Willow, where we were like older and we had jobs. I couldn't really choose so I was like a doctor, a vet, and a teacher. I mainly want to be a doctor though. I don't know which doctoring school I want to go to.*

I am Fortunate

As Taylor and I discuss broader sociocultural concepts such as lifestyle, class, income, and class-privileges, it becomes clear that she has developed her own ideas and understanding of the varying levels of such concepts. With that, she is able to name the benefits and affordances she receives with a middle/upper-middle class status, and in some cases the implications. Overall, Taylor feels fortunate for her economic position in life.

Middle-class affordances. Taylor believes her family is privileged in many regards. She notices her socio-economic status in relation to her peer and recognizes the benefits of a high income, a nice neighborhood in a desired community, high-quality public schools, and a good education. In terms of socioeconomic status, *we'd be in the middle part of the middle class. I'd say we fall right in the middle but a little bit more to the rich side, because my mom tells us all*

the time about how we have all of these things that a lot of kids don't get to have in their life. We travel a lot, and we have soccer and all these activities that are paid for and other things. I'll talk to one of my friends about going on cruises, and she'll be like, "Wait. What? Cruises?" And, I'll be like, "Yeah. We've gone on like four of them." She'll be like, "Cruises?" For my eighth birthday it was an American Girl doll theme and we went to Chicago and we did American Girl Chicago. It was like two stories and I had like $250 to burn on all American Girl doll stuff. Taylor indeed recognizes these experiences as privileges that other families, her peers, and friends don't automatically share. *I know some people that are higher up on the scale, and some people that are in the middle or where I am, and then some people that are farther down on the scale.*

When I was littler we lived in an area where we knew there was a lot of theft going on. It wasn't very good. And so, after Sophie was born, we didn't live there for very much longer. We moved to [the community] and *we've lived here ever since then. There's so many nice people. We know our neighbors. Back there, there weren't really any children and the school wasn't very good. My parents wanted to find a nice school system and good neighbors and somewhere where they could feel safe with me and little, small Sophie. I guess where you are on the social class is depending on where you can afford to go to school. Like, if you were on the lower-class, you'd have to go to I guess a lower school and if you were on a higher class you could pay to go to some really, really great private school that everybody talks about all the time. I'm in the middle of the middle class. We can afford to go to a really, really great public school that's amazing. I think it's because of my class. My parents had enough money to move into* [the community] *which is now really, really expensive. If we weren't where we are in the middle-class, I probably wouldn't get to have the school. I wouldn't get to do the learning that I do at my school now.*

Taylor believes such economic affordances also play a role in the classroom. For instance, *my teacher might prompt us with, "Okay guys, you're going to do a Quick Write about what you did over the break" and I'll go, "Wow, my break was awesome. I went on this long plane trip to so and so and we did all of this amazing stuff." And then the person in the other class would go, "Well, I stayed at home, but we had pancakes and it was awesome." I am pretty fortunate enough to be able to write about my experiences about how I get to go on all these trips. Even when I stay at home, I get to do all this fun stuff. One year my teacher had to start printing out papers because one kid in our class didn't have access to the internet at home. I can just quickly type in whatever I want to do, but this person has to hand write every single little thing for their writing piece.* Taylor's observation of privilege and affordances seem to start with self and extend to her peers. Some of her most memorable observations of class differences come from school.

Noticing class status. Taylor shares moments that stood out to her, in which she became more aware of class status and privilege. *I do notice sometimes that some other kids don't have the same thing. I really figured this out when my mom was paying for me to go on field trips. It was only like $70 or something for every single one of the field trips last year. But, instead she paid $90 to help for some kids whose parents couldn't afford for them to go on the field trips. So, I figured that out then – some kids aren't as fortunate as I am to have my parents to be able to pay for everything that I need in my school. So, I figured out last year, that some kids weren't as high on the social class as my family was. I'll go to lunch, and I'll see my friend here only has like a small sandwich with a bit of something in it where my lunch usually has like 8 different things in it. I'll be like, "So, this person doesn't really get to eat as much as I do, or doesn't really have enough money to pay for food that they need." I've also realized that when we have a fancy*

day or like a picture day, one kid would come in with a suit and a tie, and another kid would [have the] same shoes they always wear. Taylor wonders, *"Huh, so some kids just don't have enough money, or don't want to put their money into things such as paying for fancy clothes." I am very, very fortunate to be where I am and have everything that I have.*

Shared experience. Taylor feels she and other Black students at her school share a similar experience in terms of being a minority in the friendship circles. *We both kind of have the same type of circle of friends because there aren't as many people that look like us.* Within our *friend group* there are *lots and lots of people that don't look like us. We're the same in that way.* Taylor also introduces the intersectionality of race and middle-classness as a rare shared experience. *For the past few years I've noticed ... well, I consider myself Black or from the African-American community, but I think that I differ from other kids in the Black community. I guess these kids are lower in class or they're kind of not as high as me.* But *this year I was fortunate enough to have a kid in my class— a boy. I consider* [him] *almost the exact same status as me. It's pretty cool to me. Since he's also in my Excel class. Last year there were people of color in my Excel class, but I don't think that there were any Black people in my* [homeroom] *class. This year, there is another Black kid in my class and I get to interact with him and I get to do my projects and stuff with him. I mean, we have different personalities but we're still like the same.* Here, Taylor shares a sense of enjoyment at having what she perceives to be someone like her – Black, middle-class, and also gifted. This is a rarity for Taylor, which highlights the importance of her experience even more.

Writing and Learning

Taylor's school writing experiences are largely positive. She speaks highly of most of her teachers and she likes to write. Even when Taylor can't find joy in a writing assignment or lesson, she seems to find value in the experience anyway.

Positive perception of writing instruction. Taylor's fourth grade teacher was *Ms. Burton. And she was really, really awesome.* Taylor speaks highly of Ms. Burton for building personal relationships with students and delivering impactful writing instruction. *She cared about all of us personally.* On a scale of 1-10, *I'd rate her a 10 because she was really, really awesome. She knew exactly what each of us needed.*

Taylor believes she was exposed to a variety of instructional writing approaches that helped to strengthen her development as a writer. She recalls in great deal her experience working through the writing process alongside her teacher. Although Taylor does not use the words "writer's workshop" her school writing experience reflects a structure of minilessons, revising, editing, and discussing the content and structure of her writing from beginning to end.

Taylor perceives her teacher's writing style as *her own type of writing thing. Sometimes she would let us all go and she would walk around the classroom seeing what we were doing and she would make adjustments. She would pull each of us aside to look at our writing and fix things up. Sometimes we would have a little mini line going around the room and each of us would go with Ms. Burton and look at our writing, conference with her, and fix it. We would also do that when we were done with our writing. When we were all the way finished. Her other way was like if we were all doing something really wrong and were messing up in this area she would take it and then she'd spend her time, like her free time at home, and she'd look through all of these teaching ideas and things. She'd find little videos for us to watch and she'd make posters*

for us about the writing. She'd write things on the poster board and then she'd talk to us about them.

Out of the all the teaching approaches, *the thing that I think made a big difference was she would conference with us. If we really messed up somewhere in our writing, she would take us back, and make us rewrite. We would have to start over from scratch. We could keep our idea if we wanted to, but we would rewrite the whole entire thing. She would come and check on us and make sure that we were going with our plan and making it right that time.* For example, *if our writing was really, really flat, like there was no, like "ta-da" moment, she'd talk to us about making it interesting,* and *not just droning on about some random thing. She'd make sure that it was relevant the whole time about the one topic. She'd be like "Is this relevant to your topic?" She would have a lesson with us about editing and then she would give us an editing paper.*

Taylor found her one-one-one conference time with Ms. Burton most valuable. In fourth grade nearly all feedback on her writing was delivered in teacher-student conferences or discussions. *She would never write that much on the Docs, she was just like, "Come over here, I want to talk to you about something from the writing*." This year Taylor's feedback is *around half in person, and half electronically via Google Docs.* While Taylor *doesn't really have a preference and can deal with anything,* she does note that she was more likely to incorporate Ms. Burton's in-person feedback into her writing because she was more likely to remember it. Whereas, *when I was talking to Mrs. Fenley* [fifth grade teacher], *I didn't remember to do that until my report card. She wrote "spelling" and "word choice" or something. I'm like, oh, whoops. I forgot about this.*

Taylor's time in Ms. Burton's class was perhaps one reason why Taylor says *I love my writing time. It's like one of my favorites because I get to express myself through something that I*

love. I actually wrote something about how reading is a skill in writing. I read all the time. It helps me with my writing. My writing has gotten a lot better. Getting closer to the end of the year [Ms. Burton] *told me this really, really good piece of information. I have a very wide vocabulary because of all of my reading that I do. And she said she wants me to use it more during my writing. So I've tried to incorporate it a lot more and things like that*. Not only is Taylor able to reflect on the specifics of her writing instruction and her experience as a whole, but she is also able to reflect on herself as a writer.

The hard and soft skills of writing. Here Taylor evaluates where she believes she stands as a writer. *I think I'm a good writer.* On a scale of one to ten, *I'd put myself as a seven because I make a lot of spelling mistakes.* She values the technical skills of writing and recognizes that they add to or take away from one's writing depending upon their correct use. *Like the content of my writing is really good. But I'll miss minor things and my spelling sometimes is just really, really crazy. I'm pretty okay at editing. Some of my friends from Excel are really good writers and spellers. They'd have like punctuation, things like that. Like my friend Mila, per se. She would help me. I'd read over hers and then she'd read over mine and we would go through sentence by sentence picking out spelling mistakes and she'd mark them as we went through. And then we'd go through again and fix all of them.* Taylor addresses spelling and mechanics as components of a strong writer. These hard writing skills are the reason she only gives herself a seven out of ten. *Sometimes I look back at my papers and go, "Wow, that's really not great," and I want to redo the whole thing a few days before I have to turn it in. So I really edit for a while, and then I just turned in what I have. So, I don't really ever feel like, "Wow, this is the best I've ever written." I don't get that kind of feeling a lot, but I do write really well.* Technical writing skills are also among the reasons Taylor rates some of her peers above her in terms of writing ability.

While Taylor clearly values spelling and punctuation in writing, she also addresses content as a critical component that cannot be ignored. On one hand, Taylor feels *your content can be amazing,* and *going back and fixing your spelling isn't a really big thing. But I like to have that right. A lot of wrong spelling would kind of mess with your content because other readers wouldn't be able to get what you were saying.* Overall, Taylor believes *content is more important because if you have perfect spelling and really, really bad content there's really nothing that you can do.* For Taylor, both hard and soft skills of writing matter. However, she challenges herself more on the hard, technical skills because she equates it with the ability to effectively communicate her ideas.

Same old genres. Taylor enjoys writing in and outside of school. However, she feels *the writing that I do inside of the school is not done by nature.* Rather it's done because she is told to write about something and she must do it. *I mean I enjoy it, but I'm told to write about a specific thing. I have to write about some specific genre like narrative writing.* In contrast, *my out of school writing would probably be something like where I got bored, and I just wanted to free write about anything. I'd write about it on my Google Docs, or I'd write it in like a journal or something. But, it's not forced. It's just when I want to do it*. Due to Taylor's busy schedule, she *very rarely* writes for pleasure outside of school, and when she does have down time, she prefers to read more than write.

For Taylor, one of the most important things about school writing is *that you're happy you get to write. I mean I get that there should be genres, but I think it should be you're happy in the genre. You can write about what you want to write about.* For instance, *you could make your fictional character go through something really serious, or you could talk about something kind of loose and relaxed. It should be where you're given the topics, but you can do what you want*

within them. Teaching in writing and reading/writing should spark ideas and other things. When I write I get to twist it in my own any way that I want, but it does have to be on the topic. Thus, Taylor appreciates a certain level of freedom within the writing assignment structure her teachers require. While Taylor recognizes a purpose to learning about genres and writing standards, writing is a more enjoyable experience when she has more ownership and liberty over the process. This sentiment is reflected as Taylor describes one of her recent writing assignments.

To complement a social studies unit on World War I, Taylor's class was assigned an argumentative writing piece. Believing she was free to create her own topic, Taylor decided to write about *How humans destroy ourselves, society, and the world around us*. She was upset and frustrated to learn that all students were required to write for the overarching topic: *The most impactful thing from World War I.* Furthermore, the teacher guided students to select between one of two choices to answer the essay question. Taylor selected trenches. For the next six weeks or so, Taylor wrote solely on the impact of trenches in World War I. *So, it's about how many ways that trenches could kill, and not just the enemy soldiers and the soldiers inside of the trenches, and then ways that trenches could protect the soldiers inside the trenches. And the third one is how trenches were a new kind of warfare in the beginning of World War I.*
In this vein, Taylor is unable to explore a broader theme of human destruction. Her writing then becomes very limited to content, rather than exploring her own larger ideas. A revelation that Taylor had during this writing assignment was the *realization that most of us have the same topic and we have the same facts so our papers are going to look the same.* But, *I feel like depending on people, and their opinions about trench warfare.* [My classmates] *had a different kind of way that they wrote about it, and that was kind of cool to me.* Once again, Taylor puts a positive spin on the content-driven assignment and finds a way to *twist it in her own way.*

Despite Taylor's displeasure with rigid writing topics, she recognizes the need for parameters and boundaries. *When it comes to writing in school, I believe that there should be a given time of writing and your teacher should let you have things to explore about your type of writing. You can take the time to explore and write what you want but also learn about time management and how you should put out your writing to where people will understand. I still obviously think there should be all different types of writing taught.* For example, Taylor believes *there are opinion pieces in writing because of all of the different ways that different people think. And then that's why there's non-fiction. People would say, "Well, how do we know these facts are true?"* She stated argumentative writing offers a writing format where the writer is expected to provide evidence to support their beliefs.

But, sometimes I think that there should be different types of writing taught in school. Like I'll go to school and we'll learn about non-fiction and opinion and we'll write non-fiction and opinion pieces. Then I'll think back to my fourth, third, second, and first grade years and I'll think, "Wow, I think we've done non-fiction and opinion writing every single one of those years." And I think, "Are there any other pieces that you can do?" I would like to tell my teacher that sometimes I really, really don't want to do the topic that we're supposed to do, and maybe there would be a different topic that we could do within the same standard as non-fiction, poetry, or opinion writing.

When Taylor's not inspired by a topic, she uses a mental strategy. *I think, "Well, what are some ways that I can make this fun for myself?" And then sometimes I just really, really have to think hard about ... How am I going to kind of put this to where I will enjoy writing about something that I don't want to write about? Even if I can't, I'll just keep going and make it to where the writing makes sense even though it's not something that I want to do.* Taylor's school

writing experiences heavily lean toward non-fiction, argumentative, or opinion-based writing. What is lacking are more opportunities for creative writing or writing of choice. Taylor's desire for more choice in writing does not mean she only wants to write narratives, stories, or fantasy-based pieces. For instance, in the World War I assignment Taylor expressed a genuine interested in the impact of human destruction. This topic connected to World War I, but went beyond the concept of trench warfare as assigned by her teacher. Secondly, as I describe below, Taylor chose to write a critical social justice poem when she was assigned a project under the theme of self-expression. Hence, Taylor attempts to find spaces in school writing that allow her to express herself creatively even in the confines of assigned topics and genres.

Creative writing and passion projects. *As a writer, I'd describe myself as liking to tell stories about things that I find interesting or something that I enjoy. Like, I enjoy reading fictional stories, so I might write a story or historical fiction. I just love the whole thought of fiction stories, so I might write a story about a little girl who lives in the 1920s and her mother fighting for women's rights, or I might write a story about somebody trying to find something that'll free them from their struggles. I like writing. If I chose to do it, I would write in my free time. For a while in fourth grade, I took to this little songbook. It's like four, five, maybe three inches. It's pretty small. I would write stories when I was about to go to sleep, and it would help me settle down for the day.*

In fourth grade, during the fiction and poetry unit, *I wrote another piece about a girl and her family. Everything's going wrong for her. She lives in a pretty small house and she lives where there's like five people in each room that she sleeps in. Her grandmother goes missing and nobody can find her. She's trying to figure out a way to find her grandmother. And so, she goes out on an adventure and she goes to look for her grandmother. They find her grandmother, but*

she doesn't want to come home. She wants to live free and be where she is. So, [the girl] *treks back home and she's really sad, and things happen along the way.* Taylor loves writing stories like this and looks forward to the day when she and her classmates begin the fiction or poetry writing units in fifth grade.

In Taylor's fifth grade classroom, *we have our writing agreements posted on the wall. It's things like "Write the whole time given" and other standards for writing.* During the first term, w*e did a short write about any story that we wanted. I chose one about a vacation that I went on. And then, our first introduction to writing was a narrative. I wrote one about the Little Mermaid told by Ursula the villain in the story. We didn't get to finish, and I was kind of sad, because I thought that would be our big project thing. I was really, really excited*. Unfortunately, the piece that Taylor was so excited to write currently sits unfinished in a folder at school. Taylor thinks this is because it was only intended to be a short-term introductory assignment that led into the main writing piece.

One writing piece Taylor wrote toward the end of the semester involved a reading assignment in which she created her own magazine to demonstrate her understanding of text structures. *I got to write whatever topic I wanted, and I did a topic on girl power! I had to write five articles and each one had to be a different text structure. That was kind of hard. I worked really hard on it for a while. I felt good about it. I like the way I got to research, what I got to research, and what I got to write, so that made me really, really happy.* The joy that resonated from this writing project was clear in Taylor's enthusiasm and passion as she spoke.

Preparing for the future. While Taylor seeks more creative freedom in school writing, she cites school writing as a benefit that will prepare her for a successful future. In particular, she views non-fiction and opinion-based writing as necessary skills and styles to master for career-

readiness. Although she has personal preferences, she recognizes the importance of studying and practicing all writing genres. *I do think it's important, because there's really no way that you're going to get through something successfully without knowing how to write a good essay. If you go to do a job, you have to write something to get into your job*. For example, *something to your boss saying, "I need this job. I can do it." And, it needs to be strong opinion writing. It needs to be strong where your boss would say, "These are some very, very good reasons. I should let you do this." But if you don't know how to do that, and you get to your place where you're going to write it and you're just like, "I never knew how to do this. I don't know how." It wouldn't be very good. I think it's very, very important to know those skills so you can get through life well and successfully.* The stylistic and art-based skills required to craft a piece of writing are different from the hard, technical skills such as spelling that Taylor discusses earlier. Taylor places value on both – citing the later as necessary life skills for a successful career.

Illuminating Critical Voice

Writing is one way for students to express their voice. It offers a platform to critically share thoughts about their life and the world around them. Taylor finds that socio-political writing is not an act reserved for the future, but an event she can participate in as an elementary student.

The power of poetry. When I first begin discussing school writing with Taylor, she immediately tells me about a poem she wrote for a special evening event at school. Students were asked to create a reflection piece to explore the idea of self-expression. Taylor chose to write a freestyle poem. *A freestyle is a poem about anything you want it to be. With it, you can write things from the deepest part of yourself. And use feelings that you've never expressed or told anyone. But it can also just be for you.* She excitedly relays the title of the poem and the

ideas she wrote about. *The Land of the Unconditional. It was about love and how in my land there was no things that could happen bad. There was just a bunch of open space. I was talking about how there were no walls to keep anybody apart ever. Nothing bad really happened to the people that lived there. It was talking about how the bees there didn't sting, instead they sung. I drew pictures of that. And it talked about where I was in the world. I had my own little tree and I would sit under there*. In her poem, Taylor shares her understanding of the world we live in and her hopes and desires for a different kind of world.

The Land of the

Unconditional

There is a love that has been lost

And it's tolling the world at a great cost

We're in a fight to have our right to

Love the unconditional love

In the world of unconditional love

There is no hate there is only love

No one who builds up gates because

Everyone loves their neighbors

No dictators no fighting no war

No children crying out in fear

For no one would be armed

with weapons for there's no fear here

And there would be no fight to fight for

Everything would be right no problems

Or struggle for everything

Would be fixed on the double

Oh but we do not live in that land

It's not the land of the unconditional

For we live in a land where life can go in

Bam, one shot and every thing could be gone

So we live a life with fear and strife

Plus the hate and the gates that keep us apart.

Unlike in the unconditional

were you can find me

Beneath the trees

Feeling the breeze

In a land that's

Coming to an end

Though I will smell the flowers

And see there buzzing bees

Who never ever sting

For all they can do is love and sing.

Though this world holds

the unforgettable never ending love

I'm afraid that it's time to shine

is coming to an end

For know one loves the person

That hates because now

No one is safe we all need gates

Though I hate to say the unforgettable

World is almost gone

Know one can just go up and give a hug

And every day millions are mugged

For in this world there is a loss of love.

Taylor's poem is political in nature. She addresses a wide range of subjects such as gun violence, crime, national borders, war, government, and the president. Reading her poem, I am impressed by the beauty and flow of her words. She skillfully juxtaposes these ideas with a loss of empathy, tolerance, and humanity, while weaving in her own visions of a dream world. I

wonder how Taylor came to write such a poem of this magnitude and ask her about it. *I was just thinking about what to write about and I thought about everything that was happening to me and the world around me. I thought about all the bad things, problems that we were having in the world – the problems with weapons going on in the USA, and I wrote about how there would be no guns to fight with or no reason to fight in my new world where everything was correct and right. We here in the U.S. don't use a dictatorship. We use a democracy. I wrote about how a world where there wouldn't be any dictatorships. Everyone would get to make every decision, and everyone would be able to put in a vote because I know that some people don't vote. They're uncomfortable with it or some other problem or something, but everybody would be able to. They wouldn't be forced to, but they would want to.*

Taylor had previously read a book titled *Refugee* (Gratz, 2017) which contributed as a source of inspiration for her poem. *Our librarians were talking about books that they thought that we should get and that was one of them. So, I read the book. I really, really liked it. There were things ... The book was sadder in some parts. And it was like confusing in ways.*

Taylor thinks and feels deeply about the world in which we live. She has found that writing poetry offers a way to grapple with, analyze, and communicate her feelings on critical issues. In her poem, *The Land of the Unconditional*, Taylor questions how these worldly issues impact herself and others. *When we did writing about poetry,* [Ms. Burton] *said that we could write about anything. When I wrote my poetry, it was something from the heart. It was something that I was very, very passionate about and a question that I just had that I really wanted to ask myself and ask about life. Other kids would do like an acrostic about something that they loved. I did something about a world where everything was right and where everything went smoothly and why couldn't that be this world.* Taylor positions her poem as different from the students in

her class in terms of topic, passion, depth, and criticality. An acrostic poem about things she likes simply wouldn't do to communicate all that she's questioning, wondering, and envisioning.

Teachers set the limits. As Taylor questions why her envisioned world couldn't actually be the world she lives in, I question whether she writes freely and regularly in school about the topics she addresses in her poem. *Some of them we won't. We're not allowed to go into politics at school. So, we wouldn't write about any political things that were happening. So, we wouldn't be allowed to write about those. When I'm writing at school, I push those out of my mind*. Taylor found the self-expression project as a way to circumvent those unwritten rules. However, she believes that these topics are typically off-limits in the day-to-day routines of school writing and not encouraged. *Because…in third grade, during the election, everybody was talking about, "Oh, darn. This and this has happened. I don't want this person to be president." And, we were told, "No. We're not allowed to talk about politics at school. That could make another person upset in some way about how they voted." So, we're not allowed to talk about political things or ask questions about that. I don't really get it. Fourth and fifth grade I think we're old enough to ask those question and do things like that*.

Sometimes Taylor's fourth-grade teacher would introduce a political topic in the form of opinion writing. However, these writing assignments were approached cautiously, with parameters on student dialogue and guidance on civil debate. *My teacher last year let us read these magazines – kids' magazines. Then she also did this thing where there were ... it was an opinion writing thing. We read a story about an opinion thing from somebody's point of view – about a kid who was wearing their Trump hat to school, and they were told to take it off in the middle of school. We were talking about if we thought that was wrong, or if it was not. My teacher would set up a board, and she'd tell us, "Okay, guys. Get stickies and write on your*

sticky what you think, and then put it on the sheet." And then, we'd talk about them and what different people said. And, we wrote about that. But when we were talking about, "Oh, boo! Boo, president!" She was like, "No. We're not allowed to say those type of things. We're allowed to say things about our topic. Do we think that's wrong, do we think that's right."

Taylor's fourth-grade teacher frequently allowed dialogue and debate with topics that were not as likely to cause a stir. *We did a lot of those throughout the year. Like in social studies, if we thought that the different* [American Revolution] *acts were wrong or something, we'd split up, and if you're in the middle, I don't know, you'd stand in the middle of the room. If you were like "No, definitely not," you'd stand on the left side of the room. And if you were like "Yes, I think that's okay," or "Yes I'm fine with that," you'd stand on the right side.* Taylor participated in several of these opinion-based activities that were typically framed within persuasive or argumentative writing genres. However, Taylor's teacher imposed verbal constraints surrounding the topics so that students were only allowed to discuss the content the teacher presented. Taylor felt this practice discouraged some students from sharing their true feelings because they would be redirected or told to stay on topic. Taylor would like to discuss and write about critical or sociopolitical topics more often in school. She feels such opportunities are limited by the teacher and grade level status. She hypothesizes that as one progresses to older grades, teachers will be more likely to allow the discussion and writing of such topics.

I feel like ... so, we really haven't done any of the political topics this year, but this year I feel like as we get older, they'll let us do more and more with it, because we're getting older and we understand it more as we get older. So, in third grade, she'd be like, "No. Definitely not." In fourth grade, she'd be like, "Okay. We can have a healthy conversation about this." In fifth grade, she'd be like, "I want to hear what you guys want to say, but I do not want you to get

overly into it." By “overly into it” Taylor refers to the way some students become angry or emotional regarding certain topics. From her experiences, she is *not actually very sure* if her class would be able to have a serious discussion or writing assignment on big political topics. *I feel like we work together more, but we seem to like yelling at each other. Some people like to be in charge, and some people are like, "No. What is happening here?" And other people are like, "Okay, since all this bad stuff is happening, I'm just not going to pay attention."* In fact, if Taylor were the writing teacher, she herself would impose similar limits. She would let her students write about critical and political topics, *but I'd also make sure that it was controlled. That it wouldn't get out of control, where there was this side of the classroom doing this and, this side of the classroom doing this. I would not let it be where the class was separated into two parts debating every single day.*

Though she agrees with the teacher’s need to set parameters on certain topics, Taylor feels there is value in students being able to share their thoughts and opinions on critical issues. She would like to do more of this kind of writing in school. *I'd like to see the different things that were said and what I produced out. I'd like to see what that would be like. Yeah. I'd enjoy that probably.* Taylor’s use of the phrase “produced out” signals an understanding that the act of writing is a process of learning for her. She is anxious to see what she might have to say about certain topics, given the opportunity to write about them in class. For now, these decisions are left to the teacher.

Writing from the heart. It is unfortunate that Taylor feels her opportunities to write on critical issues in school are limited. She feels the same concerning writing for social justice. *In my perspective I don't think I have ever actually done that –put a piece of writing out that could have changed how my community thought or how the world thought. Yet. Because I'm still pretty*

young. But, I do think that way. I do think that writing can do that for me or for other people. If any teachers ever encouraged Taylor to see writing as a tool for social justice and change, it would be her *second-grade teacher* (a Black woman) *or my fourth-grade teacher* (a White woman who stands out to Taylor as having a special connection). *My second-grade teacher pushed us to do everything that we could in writing*. *She really wanted us to push ourselves.*

With or without encouragement from teachers, Taylor independently questions the inequality and injustices she observes in the world surrounding special needs, race, skin color, and education opportunities. She wants to research and write about *why we have social justice problems in the first place in the world. I'd want to know why people get mistreated by what they look like. Why does one person think that they should be higher than another person? That would probably take a while to research. My one other question with social justice is why are people with social problems treated differently? Say someone had Autism, very minor on the spectrum, and you had to open yourself up to them and be with that person. Why do some people have problems with doing that? I know they get left out sometimes or have to try really hard to find a group of friends. I have a lot of different ideas on different things.*

But, going back to race and writing in school, my strong opinion is that depending on how much you focus on one person, to teach one person something, everybody can be on the exact same level of the thing they can learn. Like, if somebody is really behind and some people think that it's related to their race that they're behind. If that person is focused, if that person is really, really taught, then *that person can do amazing things. I think one person can do anything they wanted if they really strongly put their mind to it no matter who they were. And that's one opinion that I don't think will ever be moved in my brain.* Taylor's unwavering belief that given

equitable instruction and guidance from a teacher, students of all races have the innate ability to achieve as a writer speaks to her view of the world and her ideals of social justice.

A Place of Vulnerability

There is a sensitivity and emotional response bound in writing. These spaces are complex because they relate to confidence in one's writing ability, race, and language, among other issues. Below Taylor shares two experiences that illustrate a place of vulnerability in terms of personal experience as well as in her interactions with teachers and peers in the writing classroom.

Meeting expectations. Taylor's most unpleasant and unenjoyable school writing experience comes in the form of a fourth-grade research report on a country of her choice. Taylor repeatedly shares this story over the course of our time together as her least favorite school writing experience. *We had to write about a country. I was like, "Okay…don't really know how to do that." I was kind of confused and stuff.* At first, Taylor inadvertently *tried to write about something that wasn't a country. I wasn't told until like the last minute that it wasn't a country. I was still forced to write about something. I had to keep on changing it because I didn't have the resources I needed because, we're not allowed to Google things unless it's a specific website that our teachers will let us go on. We have a specific place that we're allowed to research, and those places don't always have everything about any topic. If you're caught on Google, you can get in trouble. I ended up doing something about Chile, because it was on one of the sites that we had things on.* Other students *did something that they saw in our Google Classroom where there was research stuff that a teacher at our school set up. So, they had all the information they needed on the website the teacher set up. But, I didn't do it off the Google Docs, because I would be like "Everybody's already going to write about this." I finally settled on Chile, and I got all of this*

great information about it. But, I had like a month to do the whole essay, and only certain times in the school day to do it. *For a while, we weren't allowed to take it home, and then once I got really, really behind, she was like, "Yes. You can take it home." Everybody else finished before me.*

Taylor remembers this as her least favorite writing assignment, the main challenge was the lack of information available to aid her in her research. Referring to the school district data bases, *it's very, very plain and we have to go on a reading website suggested from the media center. So, we have to go find that website on the media center app. There aren't very many things about countries and stuff. I feel like I didn't have the resources that I could use to do a really good essay about something*.

In the end, Taylor completed the assignment, but felt she did poorly. *I just knew that I could do a lot better than what I did for my end product. I was like, "I feel let down about it." All of my other writing things, even some of the things that I did at like the end of third grade, were better than that. I wasn't really that proud of it. Me and my teacher weren't proud of it together. She said she was proud of me for getting something finished in the time that I had. Like I really rushed myself through it. But she knew that I could do better than that. I guess she had heard something that my teacher the year before had said about my writing. She got my scores for writing and stuff like that. So, I asked my teacher, "Can you not put it up on the wall?"* To Taylor's satisfaction, the teacher obliged her request. *Everybody else's was on the wall for the rest of the year.* But *she could tell that I was let down about it. That I wasn't very proud of it and that I knew that I could do better. So, she wasn't going to force me to put it up on the thing where everybody could read it at any time.*

Taylor's research report on Chile resonated deeply with her. For someone who prides herself on being a writer and approaching each assignment with an open-mind and a sense of wonder and excitement, she felt a great sense of disappointment at not being able to achieve the task in the way in the way she envisioned she could have. Not only did she experience disappointment and frustration, but she carried the weight of her teacher viewing her work as subpar as well. Taylor also felt restricted by the information available to her, timelines, and lack of initial guidance. Her experience highlights the sense of vulnerability that accompanies personal writing. Toward the end of our interviews, I ask Taylor how she feels now when her teacher introduces a new writing assignment. *Usually, I feel excited kind of mixed with anxious, because I'm like I have a whole term which is like six weeks to do this piece of writing. I feel like I'm ready to go into this, and I'm ready to try my hardest. I'm ready to learn and take in new ideas as I go along.* Despite Taylor's positive mindset there remains a sense of vulnerability and fear. *But, I'm also kind of scared, because I'm like we did this last year, but maybe I didn't do as well in it.*

Taylor recognizes that not every writing assignment will be one that she personally enjoys or feels confident in. *Sometimes I will have to do the writing I don't feel as strong in. That doesn't really bother me as much, because I know that it'll help me push myself more in that type of writing and make me better.* I *think my strong suits are in narrative writing, because I can really well-remember the things that I've done recently and on long term. I'm also good at the fictional part. I'm good at a lot of them. It's mostly me letting myself down when I think that I'm bad at something.* Taylor's reflection on her classroom experiences carry over into other areas of observation. In particular, she considers how langauge influences her writing experience as well as her peers.

Dialect sensitivities. *So, last year I got into a lot of fights about the different ways that me and my friends would say one word. Some of my friends would have a more formal version of saying something than I would. And then sometimes I would have a more formal version of saying something and we'd get into a lot of fights over, "Well, you should say it this way because so and so." And then somebody else would say it a totally different way and we'd be like, "That's definitely not how you say it*." As Taylor seems to be alluding to the notion of dialect, I take this opportunity to expand on the definition and concept of it. I explain to her that dialect is a natural way that people speak. In particular, I introduce her to the term *Black English dialect*. I share that it's a very common way that many Black families, or African-American families may speak or say certain things. After briefly explaining this concept, I am curious to know her thoughts on it. I am a little taken aback that she seemed to grasp the concept so easily. I didn't have a similar experience with any other children in the study.

I ask Taylor if she feels like she ever speaks using a Black English dialect. *I sometimes feel like I have a Black English dialect because that's what my dad came from. Like he was raised with his dad and his mom* [just outside of a major Southeastern city] *with his four siblings. Sometimes I'll hear it in what my dad's saying. And then, my mom will say something in her different dialect and I get confused. I'll say in kind of a mush between the two dialects. Like, my mom's from the* [West Coast]. *Her accent isn't really southern at all; kind of a more formal southern dialect. And then my dad's dialect is kind of southern. When we go with my dad's family they all have the kind of southern dialect. And then when we're with my mom's family they have all different kinds of dialects like within the kind of Western, I guess,* [West Coast] *dialect*. Taylor is raised by parents who she identified as speaking different dialects, so she herself feels she speaks in two different dialects. *I would describe them as kind of ... I try to speak the same*

way as both my mom and my dad. So, sometimes I'll speak more of the Black English dialect and sometimes I'll speak more of my mom's dialect, which I don't even know what to call it. And then, sometimes I'll just speak in both. My little sister also does that. So, sometimes I'll speak to her and she'll use something different than I'm using at that time. I affirm Taylor's ability to speak in multiple dialects as a positive attribute that allows her to communicate with different groups of people. I knew that the term Black English Dialect was a new term for her, but as we spoke more, Taylor showed she was already familiar with such a linguistic concept.

When I ask Taylor if she believes whether dialect matters in school writing, she felt *it depends on what they* [students] *feel about their dialect. Like if I was reading through and I read the dialect differently and then I read it to a partner or something, and then they read it for themselves and read it in a different dialect it wouldn't really bother me because I don't really care about the different dialect. They just say something differently. But, I guess to some kids it really would differ, the dialects. Like they'd be like, "Well, there's this special type of feeling that I want to have with my writing," and it wouldn't be said in that type of dialect*. Taylor alludes to dialect as a purposeful and stylistic decision of the writer. Dialect is simply another communication channel in writing.

However, in terms of her school writing, Taylor does not *write in that Black English dialect. I think I write in the more formal dialect I think that my mom uses. Sometimes I'll hear my dad say something and I'll go, "Wow, that's a cool word." Then I'll find out what the meaning is and I'll use that in my writing or something. I just try to find out different, cool words that I can use when I'm writing to go along with my dialect theme. It also depends on who my character is when I'm writing. We did the gold rush and I knew that people spoke in a different*

type of dialect then and I tried to capture that dialect in my writing. I'll do that if I'm writing about a special time period. But, I usually write in my kind of formal way.

In the past, Taylor has noticed how teachers respond to children using Black English dialect. *Sometimes one of my teachers would correct ... Like, if they said something kind of oddly even for the Black English, she would correct them. But, usually they* [teachers] *respond pretty well. Like,* [teachers] *won't be upset or something if* [students] *use their dialect. They won't really care as much of the dialect as long as it's proper English they can use in school*. Here, Taylor presents a contradiction. She believes students' dialects are embraced by teachers, but only if they are using a privileged, academic dialect. Taylor does not seem to view the singular notion of correctness as problematic. However, observation of her peers ridiculing others for the way they spoke do stand out to Taylor as unkind. *Last year there was a boy in my class. He's from both Georgia and Alabama and he had a really strong Black English dialect. Sometimes the other kids would laugh at him and he'd feel kind of ashamed after talking. My teacher would scold them. And I was like, "That's not very nice guys." I would fully understand what he was saying, but everybody else in the class would laugh and think that it was gibberish.* Again, I am taken aback at Taylor's observant nature as it pertains to dialectal differences and the notion of status and privilege imbued in them.

Brown. Girl. Gifted. Writer.

Taylor is one of a few Black girls in her class, and the only Black girl in her gifted class. She navigates her home, schooling, and recreational spaces with a sense of pride in who she is and the talents she has to offer. However, as Taylor situates her identities within these spaces, Blackness becomes more complex and she recognizes how her identity shapes her world view as a writer.

Grappling with labels. When I ask Taylor whether she identifies as a Black girl or African-American girl, she wrestles with how to respond. *I'm not sure. I mean I don't get African American. I get that I guess my roots come from Africa, but I've never been there. I've never seen it other than in pictures, mostly from my mom and dad's experiences*, referencing her parents' mission trip to Zimbabwe, and honeymoon trip to Cameroon. Taylor briefly explores the idea of the hyphenated "American" suffix that's attached to marginalized ethnic groups in the United States, such as African-American or Asian-American. As she understands it, the hyphenated American label exists to help discern groups of people who have roots scaling several generations back to a country outside of the United States. But she wrestles with the fact that she has no immediate connection to Africa. Despite the tension with this label, *usually, I do refer to myself as African-American.*

Taylor wrestles to identify the difference between labels of "Black" and "African-American." *But then, I also think about people who I guess I call Black. I don't really consider myself like them. I think of myself as just right in the middle. I think of Black people as people that are confident in who they are and their beliefs,* or as having a strong sense of Black pride. *And then there are people that call themselves African-American and they're okay with being called African-American even though some of them have never been to Africa, and are just born and raised here by their parents, who are born and raised there by their parents.* In other words, Taylor identifies as African-descent although she can only trace back immediate family generations to the United States, rather than Africa. She sees Black identity more broadly relating to culture and people as a whole. *I just think that I stick myself right smack in the middle of that.*

Although, *sometimes I feel like I lean a bit more to the first side of the people that are competent in their belief* [of Black pride]. *I listen to African-American music with my parents, and we kind of sit in the living room and we tell Alexa, to play songs. Like in the morning we'll tell her to play Stevie Wonder. And then other times when we're kind of running late to get out the door we'll tell her to play "5 Minutes of Funk" by Whodini. And we kind of root with these songs and root with the feelings that they kind of portray.* Taylor's description of her family bonding around music by celebrated Black R&B and early rap artists, as well of her use of the word "root" speak to a sense of her belonging and connection within the Black community. Although Taylor can identify this space of music and family as a source of Black pride and connection, she also recognizes spaces where this connection is absent.

Except for me. Taylor can't help but notice that in many of her daily life experiences, whether it's in school, extracurricular activities, or her classroom, she is often the only Black girl. Indeed, for the fourth- and fifth-grade school year she has been the only gifted Black girl in her class. Taylor reflects on her experience as a young, Black girl, stating *I see all of my friends, and I'm like, "I'm different from them but the same." Last year, I think I was the only Black person on my soccer team. I would look at other soccer teams that I'd play against in my league or against everybody else in the* [team]. *I look at them, and I'd say, "Not a lot of them are Black or African-American." I think about myself, like I'm playing against a team that is all White, and I'm on a team that's all* [White] *except for me. I think it's the same with my Girl Scout troop now. There's three of us in my Girl Scout troop, and sometimes with my classes, it's like that. In my group of friends in my class, it would be like that. I'm like, "Hmm..."* She reflects on these schooling moments and recreational spaces and wonders why there are so few Black girls.

One space Taylor frequents where she is immersed in a sea of brown faces is church. It is here where *I feel surrounded by people almost exactly like me. I know two girls that I've known for a long, long time. Their names are Haley and Eva* and they are close family friends Taylor met in preschool. *I don't see them very often, but they're just like me. They also play soccer, and they do things a lot of the things that I do. They have the same personality as me and other things. And then, I feel surrounded, and comfortable, and happy I guess.* After listening to Taylor, I wonder if she has ever written about her experiences with race or social status in these ways at school. I ask her if she's had opportunities to write about who she is, her identity, and her life experiences as a young Black girl. I mention possible sites of rich narratives such as the soccer team experience, or her Black dolls project where she and her sister gathered and donated some of their Black dolls to girls in Cuba upon learning the girls there didn't have dolls in *their skin color*. *No. There has not* been a concentrated effort that encourages Taylor to think about those instances as powerful stories. She admits that she has never thought about them as writing topics on her own, but they are ideas she will consider writing about in the future.

In school, Taylor's writing, reading, or discussion concerning Black people have been narrowly situated in themes of slavery, or the civil war era. There exists a gap between the one-dimensional academic curriculum on Blackness, and Taylor's identity and dynamic experiences as a Black, gifted, intelligent, middle-class, girl.

Chains of the curriculum. When I ask Taylor about topics concerning race in school, *there were different ones that surrounded the Civil War and things like that. The era where there was slavery. So around the eighteen hundreds-ish.* In fourth grade Taylor read the historical-fiction novel, *Chains* (Anderson, 2008) about an adolescent Black girl attempting to escape slavery and help keep their family together during the Revolutionary War. *All of the Excel*

groups had to read Chains *and really discuss what the book was about. We did all these essays about different questions from the book.* [The teacher] *would make up questions from the book* Chains. *We did a couple of things about the concept of enslavement. Like we read about how the main character, Isabel, got branded and we talked about what we think about that, or how we thought it was wrong, or what our thoughts were on that part of the book. And then, we talked about how that happened in real life. We would write about what we thought about* [a] *character. One week, we had to draw a picture of what we thought the characters looked like from the description of the book. I enjoyed* [Chains] *a whole lot. Some of the other kids in Excel didn't enjoy it. But I was really, really excited and I got* Forge (Anderson, 2010)*, the next book in my library.* Indeed, the novel resonated with Taylor so greatly that she went on to locate and read the remainder of the series on her own. *I was the only person in my Excel group.*

Recently in Taylor's class *we talked about, again, George Washington Carver. We talked about some of the problems that he faced. Like with coming out of slavery and not being accepted.* [The teacher] *asked us a question about how he was so smart and he got into this great school, but they said that he couldn't get into the school because of his color. And we talked about that for a while and then we went back to things like what he did after that. And so she'll ask us a critical question or something like that and we'll write down in our journals and then talk about it after the lecture is finished*. Taylor finds the topic of slavery as a site of African-American history interesting and compelling.

Taylor believes her identity as a Black girl with brown skin influences her view on the world and the writing that she does in school. *I see the world differently for the skin color that I have. I see news stories that happen to people with my skin color, and I see bad things that I never want to happen to me on different advertisements and news stories. And I'm like, wow, this*

is just awful. I think if I had a different skin color, I'd see kind of a different world, seeing different things happen to people with my skin color. That's really the only way that I believe that my writing [is] *changed. If I had a different skin color, I wouldn't really be able to feel the way that I did.*

Taylor's ability to reflect deeply on her identity and as a Black girl, a student, and a writer are somewhat remarkable for a fifth grader. Taylor describes three key attributes that help her successfully navigate school writing with these identities. *I think all the things that help make me a good writer ... One is how open minded I can be about what the topic is, two is kind of the ways that I can figure out how to…honestly kind of maneuver around the topic and still make it the structure that we have to make it but make it a bit more interesting. And then three, I would say my creativity.* Taylor attempts to find a way to make school writing meaningful for her. She grabs opportunities to write freely and critically, and she attempts to make every writing piece her own.

Meet Asher

Asher's house is just down the street from the local elementary school. As I pull up to the older, ranch-style home, I enjoy the familiarity of the historic neighborhood and the different architecture of the homes on the street. I notice a few young children playing just to side of Asher's house. Asher's mom, a partner in a law firm, extends a bright and kind smile and offers me a bottle of water. Asher's dad, a business analyst for a government agency, also greets me. They leave Asher and I to chat in the living room and busy themselves in other parts of the house. The living room is filled with dark cherry wood furniture and cream-colored leather sofas. The kitchen is just out of sight, separated by walls where I can see glimpses of Asher's mom, dad, and brother moving about. Ten-year-old Asher sits quietly across from me, cross-legged in

an antique-looking arm chair in the formal living room. There is a grand piano just to right of him. I sit on the couch across from Asher. He seems timid and reserved at first, his responses short, and matter-of-fact. The shyness dissipates as the interview progresses. It is a contrast to his vibrant personality as I've previously witnessed as a teacher at his school and as his mom describes. Asher is a warm shade of brown. He is in fifth grade and has on trendy black rimmed glasses and a black Star Wars t-shirt. He is soft-spoken, but confident in his convictions. He becomes more opinionated and enthusiastic as we discuss certain topics. For example, I soon learn that Asher wants to be an actor when he grows up. His description of an acting camp he attended in Tallahassee provides my first glimmer of Asher's outgoing personality in the course of our session. *It was fun. We did singing, dancing, a talent show. I was the coach and I had to train the princesses to get ready for battle or something because they had to get pumped up and trained.* Asher's love for Broadway and theater fuel his interest in pursuing a career in acting. He is particularly interested in *action movies*.

Asher enjoys fantasy, *comics if it has fantasy and powers and it's interesting,* and action-based stories. He cites *James and the Giant Peach* (Dahl,1989/1961) as a memorable book for him that he read in third grade. He was also excited about a *Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962) that he started in fourth grade. The teacher *gave us separate books and then she would read it to us sometimes. We wanted to finish it before the movie, but we failed. Then we just saw the movie*. *We got, I would say, to the fifth, sixth chapter*. Despite an interest in these books, he is *not a full-out reader, but I'll read. It's just I'm not that type of kid who always reads. I'll read – but I have a life to live.*

Asher says his friends would describe him as *funny, nice, energetic,* and *happy*. In other words, *I just keep them happy.* Asher's friend group is a *mix of all races,* and boys and girls.

Most of them live in or near Asher's $500,000 neighborhood. *Jacob normally makes us laugh. Phillip, he makes us happy, too. Seth, Colton, they really just do their thing and it works*. Asher feels a sense of pride in describing the special qualities of his school. He feels a *connection* to it. *We get along. We have fun. It makes school fun. We have good teachers.* In comparison to the Private School he may possibly attend for middle school, Asher *likes Blue Lake's personality and energy more*. His only Blue Lake critique: there should be *more recess*. After all, Asher is a student who *has to play*. It comes as no surprise then when I ask Asher about his favorite subject in school, he states matter-of-factly that it is *lunch*. *Because you get to eat and relax and that's besides recess.* While Asher enjoys the more social aspects of school, he recognizes the importance of doing well in school. On a scale of 1 to 10, *I'm going to go with an 8 because I like school. Sometimes I don't like it, so a 7-ish, 8, because I like it, sometimes I don't, but it's very important. For my parents, I would definitely say a 10*.

Asher perceives his school to be racially diverse and cites this quality as a positive that benefits all of the students there. There are *White, African American, Whites, Asians, Indians. It's good we have all of them because when you go out in the real world, you're going to need to know how people function, if that makes sense. Then when you go out there, you're not like, "Oh, I've never seen one of them before," and then you end up getting hurt probably. It's good that we have a different variety of races mixed so we can all get along*. Although Blue Lake indeed represents a diverse racial and ethnic study body, Asher accurately recognizes that *most of them are White,* and unintentionally lists *Whites* twice in his description of the school demographics.

Asher envisions himself attending Stanford University in the future and has his young adult life all planned out. Asher's plans coincide with his older brother, Austin who is 16. Asher and Austin typically *fight, watch movies, play games. My brother wants to play basketball, so*

he's probably going to already be in L.A. If he's already in L.A., and I go to Stanford, and it's the summer, I can just drive down and then live with him. After that, time to pay my house, and get a job like at Starbucks or a life guard. But before college there is middle school to consider. Asher begrudgingly participates in his family's quest for the right private school for the next coming years. He recently interviewed and toured a nearby private school. *It had a variety of races. It looked more different. It's bigger. We toured the school and we had an interview with all the questions about, "Would you like this? Would you like that?" and all their activities they had.* Asher would *kind of* like to attend the private school, but has some reservations. *As long as I get all my friends going there, I'll only go then.* Asher may not have choice in the matter, but it is clear that his friendships are important to him.

The Intersection of Race, Class, and Education

Below Asher shares how his friendships, relationships with peers, school experiences, and his family life have shaped his ideas on broader social issues such as race, class, and education. He examines his position as a young, Black, middle-class boy with a sense of reflection and awareness.

A position of privilege. Asher recognizes that his family is an upper-income family. Although he does not use the term middle- or upper-middle class, he feels that he is afforded benefits that not everyone has access to. *Some people are super rich, some people are mid-range and some people are poor/low-income.* On a scale of 1-10, *I think that we're a seven because of the fact that we're not super high-class,* but *we are a pretty good income family. We have a piano and furniture, expensive furniture.* Referencing furniture in the living room, *my mom told me that's Italian leather from D.C. so it's very expensive. We got this piano like a year ago, which I could already tell that's expensive. And then we got these chairs, which I can tell is very*

expensive too. We're always riding in high-class airplanes and all that. When we were in D.C., I remember my mom had a limo driver for me. And two maids, and I used to play with their kids. When I was little, I remember when I got a lot of toys. Now, I don't mainly play with toys. I have an iPhone. Also, *I have food to eat and a bed to lay and sleep on.*

In comparison, Asher shares his perspective on students from low-income, and/or poor families. *A few Whites are low income, not many, but a few. It's NOT Indians and Chinese. I know a lot of African-Americans who are low income, and a lot of Hispanics who are low income. Poor people mainly live in apartments and they live in a room about the size half of this house I would say or a quarter of it. They have hotel apartments, one bed with the TV and they have the pull-out couch. I've never lived in an apartment. At school, I know we have some kids who are poor and I know we have some kids that are rich.* For students who Asher believes may be poor, *I can tell by how they wear the same clothes or the same pants every day because their washer may be broken or they have to pay 25 cents for it and they don't have it. So they have to go old-fashioned –get a bucket and soap and wash it and let it dry. Then they have to wear it another day. And on picture day, they don't dress the best.* Also, *a lot of kids go to breakfast in the morning because they don't eat breakfast out of school because the bus gets them so early. I think they don't have money to get it but at least they eat. They eat at school.*

Here Asher specifically refers to the majority-Latinx students who are bussed across town to attend Blue Lake Elementary due to temporary rezoning status. These students must catch the bus as early as 5:30 AM to make it to school on time. Asher is aware of many of the challenges low-income students may face. I am curious as to how and why he can articulate so many nuances of their perceived experience. Asher cites *context clues* and the fact that his *friends have told him they don't have a lot of money* as the basis for his understanding.

When I ask Asher how the low-income students he describes might have a different schooling experience from him, he converges a series of factors such as income, neighborhood, academic ability, and quality of education. First, *since they're on a low income, they're not that smart and that's why they come to our school –so we can help.* Here Asher makes a broad generalization. He draws a connection among income opportunity and school quality, but makes assumptions about intelligence and achievement. He continues his perspective that *if they can't pay the rent in the house, in the apartment, then some of them probably can't pay their lunch money at the school. They probably can't get the water bill up and all that since they live in a low-income house. Probably if that house is down the street, it's going to be a low-income school. Probably, the teachers themselves live in the apartment. If I lived in an apartment and the nearest school was down the street and* [Blue Lake Elementary] *was about an hour away, I would probably go to the low-income school.* Asher underscores his ideas on class with the assumption that teachers at low-income schools reflect a similar socioeconomic status. He does not make the same economic assumptions about the teachers at his school.

Asher recognizes that *if I didn't have this school, then I wouldn't have the amazing teachers to teach me how to write DBQ* [Document Based Questions] *and everything. If I went to a low-achieving school, then they would probably teach low. If I get put in there, I'll probably be writing stuff that I've already written. Let's say I went to Blue Lake til' third or fourth grade or something, and then I went to a lower school. Then I would be writing stuff that I already have written, and it would be easier for me, and I like to have a challenge around a few times.*

Secondly, Asher views the schooling experience of low-income students as different from his own because he has noticed race and class intersections in the placement of students in homeroom classes. *Like last year Ms. Johnson she had Whites, Blacks, Hispanics. This year she*

has all Hispanics. But *it's not the income. It's kind of like their education and where they end up.* For example, only a few Latinx got in to what Asher perceives to be the highest academic-ability class. He quickly lists the fifth-grade homeroom classes from what he perceives as the highest to lowest and the number of Latinx students that are represented in each class. *Zero Hispanics got in Davis', but they were like ... their dad was probably Hispanic, but their mom was like White. So they were basically a mix. But full Hispanics, they got in Ms. Johnson's class.* I am struck by the level of detail in which Asher notices the placement and movement of his peers. There is also an assumption of whiteness as a requisite to getting into Mr. Davis' class. When I ask Asher to share what he notices with regard to other Black students, he notes similar patterns; most of the low-income Black students tend to be in the lower classes as well, and not many Black students overall, regardless of class are represented in the higher classes. Once again, Asher feels this is due to education levels as opposed to solely income status.

Asher has rightfully determined that low-income neighborhoods are often zoned for nearby low-income schools. He also alludes to the threads of disparity that connect quality education, income, and equitable education experiences. Asher, himself, is not sure he would be able to attend a school an hour away from his home if he and his family were struggling financially.

As far as the income levels reflected in his own neighborhood, he rates it an *eight to nine. It's peaceful, you can be free. You don't have to worry about that much because a lot of people live in* [million-dollar neighborhood nearby]. *We're probably the only Black family on this street. I don't know about the* [specific neighborhood] *people, I know there probably is some people. I just haven't been to every single house but I know that they're probably are some Black people at* [affluent neighborhood] *and* [affluent neighborhood] *and all that.* When I ask Asher why he

thinks there are only "some" Black families that live near him, he lists several possibilities. S*ome Black people can't pay their rent. They have probably low-income jobs. They don't have academics to get a good job or something like that. Some moms and dads go through college again so that they can get a better academic and then they can put food on the plate and make more money.* Again, Asher thinks beyond his own circumstances and imagines some of the challenges for other families. Mostly, he attributes his ability to live in a high-income neighborhood to his mom and dad's income and their jobs.

His evaluation of his class-status is based on factors such as material goods, neighborhood, and education. He uses the status of his peers as a reference point to help determine where he and his family may fall on an income and lifestyle scale and notes several economic and education inequities he does not have to contend with.

A sense of solidarity. Although there aren't many other Black families in Asher's immediate neighborhoods, Asher believes that he and the other Black students at Blue Lake Elementary, regardless of class status share several cultural connections. *Personality. And we always have our backs. We never stop giving up. We help each other out. We have a different connection than White people*. For example, *a lot of people say that all Black people are like brothers and sisters since we all like originated from Africa, and a lot of people believe it. So when you're going somewhere, you don't have to feel lonely because you always have those people in your back or your ancestors or something like that. When I'm speaking with my African-American friends, I can say "Black" around them. But I normally don't do it around others. Normally, I say African-American but mainly we don't talk about races. My friends, we're all mixed together so we just talk about other stuff.* When I ask Asher pointedly, "What is it like to walk in your shoes as a young Black boy?" he confidently responds, *It feels good because you*

can show other races that our race could be just as good as your race in engineering or reading. It feels good. Yeah…just feels good. Asher holds a positive self-image of himself as a young Black boy and feels a sense of unity among the Black race.

Outside of school, Asher cites Black and White spaces and the sentiments he connects to these experiences. *On my baseball team, there's only three Black kids. We all are treated equally because when we bring the runs home, or we slide and we're safe, they don't judge you by how you play.* [The coach and other players] *are just so motivational. The coaches treat us really positive.* Asher says he typically is not "uncomfortable" in predominantly White spaces *because I have a lot of White friends.* While Asher doesn't seem to mind being one of three Black children on his baseball team because of the positive team climate, he does use a different word to describe his experience in a predominantly Black space. *I have choir. It's at our church.* Here, *I feel comfortable because people say you're just all around your brothers and sisters.* Asher affirms for himself a Black space and a sense of community among other Black people in his church.

Becoming a Writer

Asher likes school writing. He is proud of his writing accomplishments and his ability to complete the required assignments. He attributes his successful foundation as a writer to his third and fourth grade teachers. For Asher, he appreciates what he has learned in his upper-elementary writing experiences. Much of his school writing experiences have been guided by structures and formulas, but Asher is not overly critical of this learning process, nor critical of himself as a writer.

Third-grade writing foundation. When Asher reflects on his previous writing experiences, his third-grade teacher, Mrs. Tinsley, and his fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Maxwell

both stand out to him. Asher credits both of these teachers for helping him achieve a solid foundation as a writer. On a scale of 1-10, Asher rates Mrs. Maxwell a *10 because she was nice, but at the same time, she was hard on us so we could learn and push ourselves.*

Asher recalls his third-grade writing year as a comprehensive and rigorous ELA schedule filled with reading comprehension, spelling, writing, non-fiction news magazines, novel studies, and history-based essays. *Monday, she would give us a sheet of paper that we could study for our vocabulary words because we had a test on Friday. Then she would give us about two more assignments.* [We would] *read and answer a few questions – The Scholastic News, probably. When we finish all that, the stuff that we didn't finish, she would give it to us for homework. Then we took it home for homework. When we came back Tuesday, she was expecting us to study our words, so we would study with her, do more reading. Then by Friday, she would pass out the test.*

Although we were initially discussing Asher's fourth grade writing experience, he consistently brought his third-grade teacher into the story. *It started with Mrs. Tinsley. Mrs. Tinsley helped prepare me and Mrs. Maxwell finished me.* [Mrs. Tinsley] *pushed us hard – really hard. Since she pushed us hard, she prepared us for fourth-grade writing. Then when I got into fourth grade, it wasn't that complicated. It was a breeze. The new methods that we had to learn* were *complicated; that wasn't much of a breeze, but the other stuff, Mrs. Tinsley really prepared me very well for.* Asher saw similarities in the types of writing required in third and fourth grade that led him to believe fourth grade built on, extended, and strengthened his development as a writer.

For instance, Asher spent a lot of time writing essays in third and fourth grade. *We did it about history in Mrs. Tinsley's class. We always did history.* Many of these essays were to be

composed using a certain structure. Asher recalls an acronym that both teachers encouraged called, R.A.C.E. He explains that R.A.C.E. stands for *restate the question, answer, cite, and then explain.* The purpose of the R.A.C.E. acronym is to help students structure their responses to craft a formulaic and cohesive answer, often in response to state writing assessments. *We always have to do R.A.C.E. and then she would give us a sheet. You read it, highlight, and then write about it. That's what she would do. When I was in Mrs. Maxwell's class, and Mrs. Tinsley's, they told us sometimes you can have* [the R.A.C.E. structure] *when you give in assignments for R.A.C.E., and sometimes if you're just making up your own story then you can use R.A.C.E., but you put it in your idea. If it's a hard paragraph to read, then it helps sometimes, but when I'm making it up, it doesn't help that much.* Asher finds the acronym to be a helpful reminder of how to formulate certain writing pieces but doesn't feel it's necessary in narrative or fiction writing.

The formulaic writing structure guided by the R.A.C.E. acronym was a memorable part of Asher's third and fourth grade writing experience. Perhaps most importantly, however, is that he remembers his time in third grade as the year *I learned that I could be a writer and it's not that hard.* Indeed, he credits *Mrs. Tinsley* first *and Mrs. Maxwell later on* for his solid foundation as a writer.

Write this way. Asher's fifth grade writing experiences continue to be taught using similar structure and formulas. For example, Asher routinely writes and responds to a critical thinking and writing program called The DBQ Project, which stands for Document-Based Questions. DBQ writing assignments pose a singular question, which in Asher's experience is often rooted in a historical theme. Several primary documents are provided in the unit, and students are expected to read and examine them carefully. As a culminating project, students

gather evidence to support their position and write a well-crafted, evidence-based, argumentative essay in order to answer the single question.

We have DBQs. It stems from Document-Based Questions. It's just one question, but *it's a whole packet on it. She went through every chapter with us as the whole class and we wrote down the main point of each document and cite our favorite evidence. Then we could put it down.* The expected outcome of a DBQ is *a five-paragraph essay. The DBQs are interesting* and *fun because it's history.* For instance, the most recent DBQ Asher completed asked the question, *"The Long Drive: Will you re-up next year?"* Asher excitedly launches into the topic of *Cowboys from San Antonio would go to either Dodge City, Kansas or Abilene, Kansas because those are cow towns. They would walk like 54 days and up to nine weeks. They would walk all the way up there. Since Abilene, Kansas was a cow town, we had trains that went from Kansas to New York and Northeast, where people would pay for the beef. So then they put them on the train. They went out to the Northeast and made money. And then they came back and walked that walk. We just got a new one last week: "What caused the Dust Bowl*?"

Although Asher enjoys the history he learns from the DBQs, he is sometimes frustrated by the writing requirements in composing the actual essay. In this case, the DBQs *are okay. They're not the best*. One reason for his frustration is that [the teacher] *makes us do two citations in a paragraph. The first* [DBQ] *she said that we could do one, but for the "Dust Bowl" and every other one, we have to do two citations. We do the intro of background/thesis, and then conclusion at the end. So then it's just the three other* [body paragraphs] *that have citations in it.* Again, while Asher does not draw on the R.A.C.E. strategy here, he must follow the traditional format of a five-paragraph essay. In this way, Asher is learning that writing for school consists of

required formulas, text-structures, and patterns. Such rigidity contradicts the creative, freestyle, fantasy, adventure pieces Asher most enjoys composing and reading.

Creativity Counts

Asher's school writing experiences present gaps between what he would like to write about, and what is he expected to write about. For Asher, school writing disproportionately focuses on non-fiction and historical texts. Although Asher enjoys writing creatively about action, adventure, and fantasy, he is not able to explore these topics at school in the same way that he is expected to write about other teacher-directed topics.

Writing freely still has boundaries. "Imagination is more important than knowledge" – Albert Einstein. This is a quote that Asher shares with me when I ask him to draw anything he wants on a blank sheet of paper to convey how he feels about writing. Ironically, Asher looks somewhat deflated as he prepares to write down the quote. I assume he is worried about spelling and ask him whether he would like help with certain words. He replies with a relief-filled "*thank-you*" as I hand him a slip of paper spelling out the words he wants to write on his paper. I wince at the thought that in this moment I may have actually affirmed the opposite of Asher's beloved quote. I also consider the importance Asher places on spelling, even as he writes a quote about knowledge being less important than imagination.

Perhaps this is because Asher feels like a skills-based approach is a central part of his writing instruction. He shares his appreciation that his *teacher doesn't count off on spelling because she's dyslexic.* In her class *I feel relieved because I don't have to go back in the dictionary or raise my hand and ask a lot of questions. I just write it how it's in my head*. On the computer *she will count off for spelling because of the fact that there's this thing where if you press on it, it says, "Tell me what to do." And you type in "spelling" and "grammar" and click on*

it, it'll show you how to fix it. If we're [hand]*writing it, she won't count off, but if we are typing it, she'll count off. But grammar, she will count off. We do a lot of grammar checks. That's for Weekly Five. We do it by ourselves, but she says if we hit a roadblock on it, we can look it up on our computer. So I look up a lot of grammar things on my computer to help me.* Here again, Asher balances freedom and constraints within his teacher's expectations of skills and writing.

A reflection of the Einstein quote, Asher speaks positively concerning school writing. *It's fun. It's not that bad. You just have to really think about it and express your feelings. I like writing because you can really just bring out the inner of yourself and put your own ideas into it.* Asher consistently highlights his preference for creative writing and fiction-based genres, which is not often part of his school writing experiences. Given more of a choice in school writing, Asher would certainly choose *make-believe* and *fantasy.*

Asher hesitates to identify as a "writer" because *I don't just write on spare times. But if I do have a chance to write and it's creative writing, then I just make something up.* When I ask Asher to rate himself on a scale of 1-10, 1 being a poor writer, and 10 being a strong writer, he assigns himself an *eight because if I did a ten then the person wouldn't even care what the topic would be. Nine, probably the person doesn't really care that much, he just writes.* However, for Asher being a good writer isn't just about responding with indifference to any prompt a teacher assigns. Instead, Asher positions himself as an eight on this writer's scale because he has personal feelings toward what he is writing about. An *eight --the person would probably care about what topic they get because some topics people just don't want to write about it. Some topics could be offensive, some topics could be long, hard –I have to do too much for it.* In addition to these arguments, Asher believes strong writers bring their imagination into the writing. *I can write because I put creativity in it.* Especially if the assigned topics are *fun and*

enthusiastic, adventure, action. Indeed, Asher describes his attributes as a writer in much of the same way: *creative, enthusiastic, and fun*.

Much of Asher's school writing is currently dedicated to non-fiction, historical-based essays and other assigned topics. It is during the Weekly Five ELA rotations that Asher cites the possibility to write more freely and creatively. *We actually can express our feelings on a sheet of paper. So we have Weekly Five activities. And one of them is work on writing. We'll always have this one thing that we have to write about. A whole rotation is 20 minutes. So if we finish the topic that she's grading us for, if we finish that topic that's on the little whiteboard, then we can write about whatever we want*. The topics are usually *like, "What's your favorite movie?" "Write a summary about it your favorite book." They're normally like fun. For example, if we're just writing a summary about our favorite movie or something like that, then if I can finish that in like five minutes with everything in it (because the summary's short) then I'll have like 15 whole minutes to write whatever I want.* When that happens, Asher says *I write fun stuff. I write like Orange Justice. It's a dance in the game Fortnite that I play. That's one of my examples. That's what I wrote about once. I wrote about* Amulet (Kibuishi, 2008) *because that's one of my favorite book series. I didn't get to do the favorite movie one this week because she told us that you don't have to do it.* Asher takes advantage of the opportunities he has to write what he calls "fun stuff."

However, the writing rotation also includes more formal and structured topics with additional guidelines. *And so another one we do is the Galveston hurricane. We did a summary about that. We bullet-pointed every one. We would write each topic, like each paragraph beginning, like in big red letters. We would write it in our notebook. And then we would write about what that paragraph is about and combine it together and make it a summary.* Asher's

opportunities to write freely and creatively in school in the way he desires come in the form of 20 minutes a week. Otherwise, much of his writing is assigned in the form of a DBQ essay, or a response to the weekly Scholastic *Storyworks Magazine*, and sometimes novel study assignments.

Neither Asher's highly structured writing experiences or free writing time offer a dedicated space to write about the many critical issues addressed throughout our interviews. For instance, I complement Asher for his ability to think deeply and analyze topics like race, class, education, and social class. I am curious to know if this complex way of thinking is put into his school writing. *No, because normally I just write what I'm assigned because the major three things that we're supposed to get done is Moby Max* (Mobymax.com), *ReadWorks* (readworks.org), *and grammar check. Those three things.* Asher suggests that his English Language Arts time is largely dedicated to reading comprehension assignments on educational websites and grammar practice. The literacy tasks he lists are then positioned as less demanding in terms of critical literacy and analysis.

Moving on from Injustices

Asher has learned much about race, class politics, and society in his ten years on this planet. While he has formed an opinion on these topics, he does not recognize school as a place where these ideas are often explored or widely discussed. Instead, Asher believes that these issues cause tension and friction among peers in the classroom and should be avoided to maintain peace.

The acceptance of silence. When I ask Asher to share examples concerning the writing, reading, or discussing of race in school, slavery and the Civil Rights Movement are the two main topics he mentions. *We talk about slavery. It doesn't really affect me because I know that* [my

classmates] *are not going to be using derogatory terms to my race. Since they aren't, and I know that my friends know that slavery was a terrible thing so they know that they're not going to use it against me, and I'm not going to use it against them, because we all know at the end of the day that it was a very bad thing*. Asher ponders for a moment whether there have been other topics surrounding the writing and reading of race in his school experience. He decides *just slavery* and references a writing prompt on slavery. *I think we did it in fourth grade. I'm not positively sure, but I think we did.* He is unable to recall any other class discussions or writing assignments on race and sociopolitical issues but thinks his class *would probably talk about it if something happened to a specific race besides slavery.* Here Asher refers to current events as a possible platform to introduce sociopolitical and real-world events into the classroom, and possibly into writing. However, he is unable to give specific examples of any writing assignments that draw on such events.

At home, Asher says topics of race and politics aren't often discussed either, but he does recall discussing with his parents *that slavery was a terrible thing.* It is at home where he first learned about *Juneteenth*, a predominantly African-American holiday, marked with celebration on June 19th to commemorate the official end of slavery. *We would talk about that it was a bad thing*. I pause to ask Asher about the significance and meaning of Juneteenth. He shares *it's where all slaves got freed*. He first learned about it *on a TV show and then my parents explained it to me. We were watching the show, and then my brother asked them. They were like, "Oh, that's it."*

I ask Asher if his teachers have used any critical books or novels in the classroom as a way to write and discuss race or other critical issues. In third grade his class read *Blood on the River* (Carbone, 2006) when they were studying the Native American Unit. Asher believes his

most powerful piece of writing was *when I was in fourth grade when we sang "We Are the World." Our class was given a speech to write about something that was memorial about "We Are the World." I wrote about these artists who came together as one to help people in Africa so they could have money to buy food and live. Something like that. So I wrote something powerful but I didn't put it out there.* Asher is not sure he can say his essay on "We Are the World" had an impact on the community or others because *I just left it on my binder*.

But there were videos we watched. It's that video. I don't know what it's called. We watch it every single year about Martin Luther King, on his birthday. His day. His birthday. Here Asher is referring to an animated children's movie titled *Our Friend Martin* (Smiley, Trippetti. Boron, Heyward, Jones, London, Maliani, Reilly, Sonski,1999). I know the movie well because as a former a third-grade teacher at Blue Lake Elementary School, I would show this video each year to my own students right before the King holiday. Produced in the 1990s, the video incorporates hip-hop music and voice-overs from well-known Black actors. The focus is on a best friend duo, a Black boy and a White boy, who inadvertently travel back in time to the 1950s and 60s where they try to save Martin Luther King Jr. from being assassinated. The two realize the impact on the United States without the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and work to unravel their mistake. While animated and entertaining for children, the movie is powerful. It's laced with raw and real black and white footage from the Civil Rights Movement. There are images of Black people being sprayed with fire hydrants, attacked by police dogs, dragged by White police officers, protests, and MLK's funeral. Audio of Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his "I Have a Dream*"* speech accompanies much of this footage. I used the video as a site of critical dialogue and writing after my students viewed the movie. I am anxious to hear if Asher participated in similar activities.

Well, we watch this video that has these two kids who are going on a field trip to his house. Those two kids wander off into the restricted area and they get caught by the lady who is touring them. She says, "Go on in." They get transformed and teleported into Martin Luther King time. They explain to us, "Oh, this is depressing," all this stuff. They hear, "I Have a Dream." They hear all that and then they come on back. Then the lady is there and like, "How was the experience?" Then by the time they get back, the class is done right on point. We watch it every year. Well, I don't remember second and first [grades], *but I'm pretty sure we watched it. I like it. I like it in the way of watching it every year, but not as a full movie that we just keep on watching on normal days.*

Asher realizes that he has seen this movie in at least third and fourth grades, and as tradition goes at Blue Lake, he will likely watch it again as a fifth grader. I am curious if he learns anything from watching *Our Friend Martin* over the course of his elementary school years. *I already learned from it because we talk about him, and then we watch the video, and then it teaches us other things about him, but it's helpful in a way. It's helpful. We learn new things from the video.* Asher seems to wrestle with the fact that he has *already* learned from the movie and whether or not he gains anything new and helpful from watching it again. In the end, he acquiesces and feels that he learns something new from watching it annually.

For Asher, viewing the video in class typically leads to broader conversation on the fight for equality. For instance, he branches off to other well-known Freedom-Fighters. *We talk about how he fought for freedom and did amazing things. Rosa Parks fought for freedom.* I push for more specifics of conversation, his peers' reactions, and his personal thoughts. *I would say some of them just don't say anything at all, but their expression on their face is like, "That's just terrible. That was a bad time." Then some people say, "It's just terrible what people had to go*

through." I didn't comment on it because people may take it a different way and then they take it out of line. I comment if it gets out-of-hand, but normally we don't comment on it because since it was such a tragedy, and a bad thing, that all of the kids just feel that, "Oh, [African-Americans] *went through a lot." The kids of other races are like, "Oh, they've been through a lot. It's best we just don't comment in any way." Because then they think they may take it in the wrong way, which would lead to chaos. They don't want that to happen because they already know it was a bad thing for slavery to happen. They don't want to remind us.* I ask Asher about this silence from his classmates. *I like that they just don't do anything at all about it. Then we just move on. Martin Luther King did the right thing. When we move on, it's move on.*

There is an unspoken (and sometimes spoken) air of sympathy from students surrounding themes like the Civil Rights Movement and slavery. Asher is comfortable with these silent undertones because they represent a mutual understanding among him and his peers: These terrible things happened to Black people, we both know it, and now let's simply *move on*. Many of Asher's peers, including himself tend to focus on the suffering of Black people, rather than the actions and power of White people that caused such suffering. In this way, a narrative develops that positions the systemic power and privilege that continues to oppress people of color today as a secondary issue of racism.

It's important to note that Asher has never had a Black teacher as his homeroom or main teacher his entire elementary experience. He believes that if a Black teacher were to teach the same curriculum, it may look and sound different *because they know what African Americans have gone through, so they'll probably teach it in a different way. They'll add something that kids should know. It's appropriate for them to know about the KKK. They want the kids to learn about that. The kids don't have to learn about it, but it would be good if he taught them at the mature*

age, like fourth or fifth grade. Asher's assessment that a Black teacher may enhance a civil rights lesson leads to me wonder how his belief that students should *move on* may also change with a teacher of color.

No current politics. Given Asher's idea that it's better for him and his peers to move on from racial injustices, I ask about politics and civil rights today in United States. I want to know if he sees any connections or parallels to our world today. *I don't know. Well, we haven't been in politics. We haven't been talking about bringing slavery back, which is a good thing. I haven't heard that much about slavery. Other than that, there's other bad things happening. Trump is not being a good president by trying to start the war with Democrats and Republicans and tweeting all that stuff about women.* I ask Asher where he learns this information and he flashes a sly smile. *I have my ways.* He moves on to share that when he spends time at his grandma's house, he watches the news with her. *My grandma loves it. It's all she watches. You tag along while you're there. You just have to watch it.*

With that, Asher launches excitedly and knowledgeably into some of the latest political affairs. *I think that we're very close to going to war because the minute that North Korea hits Guam, it's over. Because that missile almost hit Guam. If it did, there would be a war, because that is a U.S. territory, right? It is, right? That missile, it was saved by the bell, because if it hit, it would be chaos.* I comment that Asher knows quite a bit about today's politics and I ask if there are opportunities to write about these events and other global topics in school. *Well, they normally don't want us writing about that in school because some people like the president and some people don't. I do know a person who likes Trump, but she likes to keep it secret. It's kind of offensive if one child writes all these bad things about the president. Then the person whose parents like the president and they like the president, then they feel offended. So we normally*

don't write about politics. I don't like to write about Trump because I may say something that I'll regret. If we do [write about politics], *we write about a politic in the past. Theodore Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt and all of that.* Asher agrees with the "no political writing" decision often made by teachers. *I think it's a good choice since some people like the president and it will be offensive if somebody writes this whole little essay about how the president is so terrible. That we shouldn't have him in the office and all that.*

In Asher's fifth grade classroom, if and when these issues come up, his teacher, Ms. Jones, *lets us have debate, she lets us defend each other,* but she remains neutral. *So if she brought* [politics] *up in the class, (which I think would be very rare) but if she did, we would all just state our opinion. Some people would say that* [Donald Trump] *is bad and she would kind of take out for the other people who liked him. But the people who went to that person who liked the president would know. But they would feel offended in the inside and Ms. Jones would kind of defend the president. So then the people who like the president would feel more comfortable.* Here Asher thoughtfully takes on the perspective of his classmates, and the position of the teacher. He describes his teacher as *nice, fun, always happy* and therefore believes she would be intentional about sticking up for students no matter their view on sociopolitical issues. Asher also recognizes that not all of his classmates would agree with him on the presidency on Donald Trump, and that these tensions should be considered by the teacher. If Asher were to design his own writing classroom, *I would let them write about like the news if they watched it, but I wouldn't let them write about politics because it could start more chaos in the classroom. I will let them write about past politics like Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln. I'll let them learn about those presidents but not the one in the office right now.*

In a follow-up interview, I once again ask Asher to share his beliefs about writing and discussing critical and sociopolitical topics in the classroom. He reiterates his stance on focusing on past politics as opposed to current issues. *My teacher says, "I think we should talk about history because if we don't know the solutions…" Like let's say another World War happens, for example, then we have this solution. If we go back in history in World War II and I, we'll know, "How did we solve this problem? How did we solve World War I? How did we solve World War II?" And then if World War III comes, we could understand that let's not fight again. Let's make a solution instead of making the scab bigger.*

Meet Zoe

As I drive to Zoe's house, I can't help but admire the beauty of the sprawling, beautiful brick homes clustered into subdivisions and discreet neighborhoods. It is further outside of the city, and the size of the homes speaks to this. I am welcomed warmly by Zoe's dad, who works in IT as a web developer. Zoe is sitting at the counter of a gourmet kitchen that opens to a large living area. She is eating dinner. Multiple bookshelves line the living room wall, each one filled to the brim with books. Photos of Zoe's late mom, who was a Ph.D. best-selling author, and her various awards for publication don a buffet table nearby.

Zoe leaves her dinner, smiles, and walks over to meet me. We sit on a large, comfortable, trendy L-shaped sofa. We sit on the same section of the couch, but facing one another. I notice that Zoe looks like the photos of her mom behind her. Eleven-year-old Zoe is in fifth grade. She has a beautiful dark brown complexion and her natural hair is braided in thin corn rows in the front that open to little natural braids with purple beads that hang below the nape of her neck. She is wearing an outfit with funky patterns and prints on both her leggings and her shirt. Zoe describes herself as *bubbly*. She thinks her friends would describe her as *weird, but in a bubbly*

way, also -- *kind of random. I'm the type of person that's the only person to do stuff that no one else is gonna do*. Zoe feels like she often entertains her friends just by being herself. Zoe has an older sister who is 13 years old. They don't hang out much, *because she's usually texting her friends or on her iPad.*

When I asked Zoe what her teachers would say about her, *most of them say that I'm smart, but I get easily distracted, like really easily distracted*. A small and mischievous smile creeps across Zoe's lips as she tells me that she agrees with her teachers' perceptions of her. *Sometimes I just look at all the posters around the classroom, because every classroom has a bazillion posters.* I'm impressed by Zoe's honesty and self-awareness. A member of the school's gifted program, Zoe is funny, thoughtful, and reflective, as evidenced by her responses throughout our interviews.

Her hobbies and interests include drawing, writing, and chess. Indeed, she wants to be an artist when she grows up. *Painting mostly. I want to paint stuff. I'll probably sell paintings ... not like sell them at a museum or something. I'll probably sell them at an art convention or set up a shop, a painting shop. I really like to draw.* She references a sketch book she recently got for her birthday. *I have a bunch of scribbles*. In addition to her love for art and drawing, Zoe cites reading and writing as some of her hobbies.

I'm thinking about being an author when I grow up. I have like all these crazy ideas kind of swirling around in my head. I've been thinking of writing kind of like a mini-book. I started it in my head, but I've never really written anything like that. I like to write mostly about fantasy, magic stuff. I like to write when I can write about whatever I want, and I don't have to stick to one thing and keep writing everything perfectly and super neat. I like to do free writing more than specific. For example, *I like mythical creatures. Once I wrote about Harry Potter, because*

I'm reading Harry Potter. I'm on the last book of the series. I watch the movies after I finished reading the book. Usually I watch them with my dad, but then he falls asleep in the middle of it, and I have to shake him awake when there's something super cool happening. But a good thing about reading, we had this reading chart, it goes from A to Z. The closer you are to Z the better you are at reading. I went all the way up to seventh grade and then after class the teacher pulled me aside and said I was like eighth grade level. Apparently, I am now the highest reader in the school. Zoe is not *overly-enthusiastic* about her reading status. *Whenever I talk about it, I seem like I'm bragging, so I just kind of avoid it.*

One activity that Zoe particularly enjoys and has participated in consistently since the first grade is chess. *On Thursdays I do chess for two hours. There's two periods – first period and second period. I do both.* Zoe *has a bunch of chess trophies in her room.* When I comment on how impressive that is, Zoe dryly points out that *everyone gets a chess trophy at the end of the year*. Nevertheless, she greatly enjoys chess. *It's really fun. It's kind of hard to learn. But once you learn everything, then it's really fun. You don't actually have to learn everything. You just have to learn the moves and some strategies and then you're all set.* Zoe is not involved in any after school sports, but attends the After School Program (ASP) each day at her school. I quickly learn that Zoe has a witty sense of humor and a sarcastic side to her personality as she describes her lackluster adventures in ASP.

We get a snack, and we sit down and do our homework, or read, or draw, if you have permission to draw, which is usually what I do, because I don't get that much homework. On a normal day, where it's like perfect weather, perfect everything, we stay out for almost two hours. Zoe is looking forward to taking advantage of the fifth grade ASP perks this year. *In fourth grade, after we went outside we watched some random movie, but now we go to the computer lab*

and just play whatever on the laptops. We're allowed to bring our phones and iPads, and stuff. On most days, Zoe can be found with her *ASP friend, Sabrina because we're both always ASP. Usually in ASP when we go outside, we just sit on the bench and talk about everyone, because we have nothing to do. Then during computer lab we just play Duck Life on Cool Math — the whole time.*

While Zoe revels in the fifth status afforded to her in the After School Program, she expresses a mock sense of disappoint at not being able to tower over all of lower elementary in a literal sense. Zoe jokingly envisioned herself as a big fifth grader *being super menacing and intimidating* to the younger students only to discover *there are some fourth graders that are taller than me.*

Outside of Zoe's After School buddy, Zoe also has what she calls her *main friends*. This group of school friends can be described as *mixed*, meaning made up of a variety of races and ethnicities. *Well, Trinity's Black. Anna's Chinese. Molly and Eli are both White. Sabrina's also White. I have my friend, Asha. She's Black, like mixed I'm pretty sure. Then I have a bunch of other friends that would take way too long to list.* Zoe describes the racial demographics of her school as *pretty good. It's balanced mostly. About two thirds of the people in the school are White, or Chinese, or Asian, but that's mostly in the lower grades, for some reason. Most of the Black or mixed kids are in third and up*. In terms of her class this year, it too is *pretty balanced. My class has 20 people, less than last year for some reason. About 14 people, somewhere around 10 people, are White. My friend, Anna, there's around three people who are Chinese, or Asian, or something, and then the rest of the class is Black or mixed. So, it's balanced.* Zoe notices these racial subtleties and appreciates the different faces and races she sees at her school. *It's diverse, which is good. If it's not diverse, if there's mostly one race or mostly another race, if you're in the*

lower half, you can feel kind of left out. If you're in the higher half, it's kind of awkward being in some place where everyone just is the same skin color as you. It's better to be diverse. To Zoe, *it's better if everyone's equal*.

Views on Class and privilege

Zoe's take on class and privilege reflect her experience within her neighborhood and school community, as well as the lifestyle privileges afforded to her. Because of the homogeneous economic status of the people surrounding her, Zoe believes that most of her peers enjoy a similar lifestyle. She does not position her family has wealthy or elite, and she does not point to any observations of people she perceives to be in a lower socioeconomic status. For Zoe, she is normal and basic, like everyone else. This sentiment is reflected in Zoe's views on both class and race. She embraces the idea that although there are different racial demographics in the classroom, she and her peers are all the same.

Living a basic life. Zoe believes her neighborhood and school community reflect homogeneous socio-economic demographics. *Pretty much everyone has a two-floor house*. When I ask Zoe to clarify who *everyone* is, she simply states, *like 80%* of *people at my school, basically. The people's houses I've been to have like two- floor houses and then like 15% have one-floor houses and the rest is like those stuck up people who have three or four houses.* Zoe believes that the majority of her peers live a similar lifestyle to her. *I live a pretty basic life. Nothing's really super bad in it. It's all good.* Zoe and her family are *definitely not poor, but definitely not rich either. On a scale of one to ten I'd say we're like a seven and a half. We're not like super billionaires, but like we're good. We have money to spend. It's not like we only have five extra dollars. We go to the store like once a week and we spend like $200. Basically, half of*

that on like random stuff. With a tone of sarcasm, *I give my dad like a quarter to pay back. Here's a penny for those thousand things you bought.*

Zoe also cites her family's frequent travel and vacation cruises as a factor in their class status. *We travel a lot. Once or twice a year we go to my cousin's house for like a few days. We usually go on a Disney Cruise two or three times a year. They're all Disney cruises. There's the Fantasy, the Magic, the Dream and the Wonder. Altogether, we've gone on 18. Now, we're just going on it in January. I am very against that, because sometimes we only go on it for three days and there's free ice cream.*

Everyone is pretty much the same. When I ask Zoe if there is a shared experience among herself and other Black students at her school, she shares *I think something I've noticed is, like in Social Studies, we don't have many classes about like racism and stuff. And I think that's because there's lots of people who would be really sensitive about that. I think the teachers and staff are careful not to trigger anyone. Just like people in general. My school is a very passive school.* Zoe clarifies what she means by passive, stating *peaceful, not wanting to anger anyone really*. For Zoe, race doesn't directly relate to her school experience. *My school is like everyone was just the same. No one really judges people. I don't think there is anything that is really changed by race in my school*. Zoe and her peers are not writing about race or *talking about it much because no one really feels like talking about it. No one really thinks about it. We're just chill*.

Zoe believes her middle-class economic status positively relates to her school experience in terms of her friendship groups and support systems. *If you have a bunch of friends who are really nice like mine, then you'd be much happier at school. You* [wouldn't] *have to deal with sadness and being poor, because everyone at school is really supportive. I notice that the friend*

groups are usually really diverse. Last year I knew this little group of girls; only one of them was Black, one of them was Asian I think and the other two were White. Zoe perceives all of them to be on the similar income levels b*ecause they always hung out.* Furthermore, t*here's not really a noticeable* [class] *difference between everyone.* Although Zoe does not believe there are poor or working-class students at her school, for students who come from lower-class families, *I think you'd probably be less happy at school because you would be poor*. Overall, Zoe is adamant that class, nor race play significant roles in her personal school experience, because *everyone in my school is kind of on the same level. It doesn't really affect it much.*

Grammar Pitfalls

As Zoe reflects on her third and fourth grade experiences with school writing, she recognizes that grammar has been a significant part of her writing instruction**.** Indeed, Zoe recalls grammar as hallmark of writing instruction, and one that is routinely part of each school year. *Ms. Parvin, who's my third-grade teacher, she was really nice. She's one of my favorite teachers in the whole school. She used PowerPoints,* and *she handed out stuff to glue in your notebook, like notes to write in more often. So, it was a little easier to remember, because she allowed you to take any of your notebooks home to review*.

Out of the many writing experiences that Zoe's had in school, she cites grammar skills as something that stands out to her. *Every now and then there's something that barely any other schools will teach you, like run on sentences. None of my other schools taught anything about that, which is cool. I learned the term for them from Ms. Parvin.* Aside from run-on sentences, Zoe feels her third-grade writing experience was filled with *mostly basic stuff that most people already knew*. *Like there, their, and they're. That's one thing that almost all the grades teach. That's like a mandatory thing* - grammar lessons *and how to write sentences correctly. Even*

though, miraculously at the end of the year, whenever I partner with someone, it wasn't that much better. I still noticed a lot of grammar and punctuation mistakes. Sometimes I didn't mention it to them when there were a lot of them, because I didn't want to be one of those people that's like, "You missed something there. You missed something there. You missed something there." As Zoe points out the struggle her and her peer continue to have with grammar, she highlight the disconnect between the teaching and learning of it. Such a disconnect is further evidenced in Zoe's fourth grade writing experience.

In fourth grade, Zoe's teacher was Ms. Harris. *She wasn't the best teacher. I wasn't one of her most favorite students ever, so that did not turn out well. I had trouble turning in assignments on time, and I got distracted easily. I've had that problem for a while*. Despite the tension-filled relationship between Zoe and Ms. Harris, Zoe believes writing was *one of my strong subjects* so she was able to maintain a successful school writing experience. Much like third grade, Zoe cites grammar as common focal point in her fourth-grade writing instruction. A typical fourth grade writing lesson *usually had a PowerPoint about something that* [Ms. Harris] *gets from the internet, and there's usually something wrong that we have to correct. It was pretty basic. There weren't many questions, because it was pretty easy to understand. It was just like grammar and run on sentences. Fourth grade is kind of like a review grade, so we did a lot of stuff that we did in third grade, but a little more advanced. We did run on sentences. We did grammar, punctuation, all that stuff. It was pretty easy, because most of us already learned it*. Still, *surprisingly, not many people were good at grammar and punctuation*. Once again, Zoe highlights the reiteration and continuous exposure to grammar skills, and contrasts that with the consistency in which she and her peers continue to make such mistakes in their writing.

Fifth grade represents her first departure from what she perceives as a heavy emphasis on grammar skills, and a progression to more writing.

Why I Write

Zoe speaks positively about in and out of school writing. She is an intelligent girl and an avid reader, which combines with a sense of self-awareness and ongoing reflection. Thus, Zoe names what she personally gains from writing. She also recognizes a power dynamic in her role as a student. As such, Zoe feels she must write in school even though she does not always agree with the topics and writing assignments.

Write to release. Zoe views writing as a cathartic process. It is through writing that she gains a sense of relief from emotions like stress and sadness. Indeed, Zoe refers to writing as an *outlet*. She enjoys writing both in and outside of school and recognizes what she gains from the process. It's *really fun. It's kind of like an outlet, like if you're feeling sad you should write a happy story. If you write like a super funny story and you present it to the class everyone* [will be] *laughing* and it *is kind of like a stress reliever. A few years ago, sometimes when I was feeling sad, I would write like inspirational little blurbs on sticky notes. I would post them in random places around my room and whenever I was feeling sad, I would just look at a sticky note. It was kind of like if you're angry you should punch a pillow until you calm down. My pillows were already thoroughly punched, so whenever I'm feeling sad, lonely, or angry I would just look around at the sticky notes and kind of feel better and calm down.* In this way, writing is a vehicle for an emotional release, as well as a source of inspiration.

Zoe also enjoys writing for the imaginative and creative spaces she is free to explore. *When I'm writing outside of school, I usually just write whatever pops from my mind.* Writing is *just overall really fun to do. It's nice to imagine stories, even if they can never happen. It's fun to*

think of what you and other people would do in situations and then write them down. Embracing the hallmarks of the budding author she may become one day, *sometimes I like to write little blurbs of stories, like whenever I'm reading. I like free writing basically, to sum it up. I think that even if you don't know what to write, like if you just scribble something down, you don't have to share it with everyone. It's not like whatever you write you have to like scream out a megaphone in the center of everyone. You can just write in something personal like a diary or a journal. Probably one with a lock if you have any siblings at all.*

There are emotional values and personal connections Zoe relates to her writing. For example, Zoe believes the most important thing she's ever written was her *first piece of actual writing.* The beginning writing is an opportunity for self-reflection on one's development as a writer. It represents a significant milestone. *If you're super old and you're searching, or you're cleaning and you find the first piece of writing ever it'd be great to see how you improved and what you thought of things, like when you were younger when you wrote it. I think that would be really important, even if it's just like a blurb about yourself I think it would be really nice to remember fun times or bad times.* For Zoe, writing flows in and out of the different spaces in her life. Writing may be something fun to share with the world, special memories to recall, or private thoughts to keep to herself. Either way, writing offers her a place for self-expression.

Positive school writing experiences. Zoe credits her passion for literature and writing to her mom, an award-winning published author and PhD. *I probably wouldn't even be writing that much if it weren't for my mom. We have billions and billions in every single room. I don't think I would be as decent at writing as I am now because whenever I'm bored, I just walk around the house and read little snippets of random books*. As such, Zoe is able to articulate what she gains from her school writing experiences across a variety of English Language Arts facets. *When I*

was eight, I found my first kindergarten journal. I opened up to the first page and it was like scribbles. My handwriting was really off. Every day in kindergarten our teacher would put something on the board. For example, *three blue triangles. You would write, "I see three blue triangles," and then draw the picture of it. I remember on the second day she did "I see 20 caterpillars" and the last page was, "I see 20 butterflies." It was really sweet how she planned the whole thing out. I opened up to the last page and my handwriting had really improved.* Zoe's recalls this writing memory from Kindergarten as a significant experience. Here, Zoe's kindergarten teacher helped her recognize her progress as a writer and instill a sense of pride and achievement. This positive and powerful moment early on may have attributed ever slightly to Zoe's views on writing today.

Flash forward to fourth-grade, and Zoe is particularly proud of the *first and only essay I've done. I forgot what it was about, but we wrote at least a seven-paragraph essay. I'm proud of it because it's a first. It's my first essay. It wasn't actually that hard. I don't get why most people are like, "Oh, Woe is me. I can never write this one sentence." To Zoe, writing an essay wasn't a big deal. It took like 30 minutes and I think I got like a 98 on it. I just missed two spelling errors. One of them was bicycle, which is like my mortal enemy as a word. At the spelling bee this year I am not going to lose on bicycle*!

Today, as a fifth grader, *I'd say I'm pretty good at writing. I read a lot of books and when I'm reading, sometimes I pay attention to the text and kind of study how the author writes things out. Most of the people in my class just write, "This person felt bad." But since I was reading Harry Potter, you know how J.K. Rowling is super descriptive? I tried to be more descriptive and it's really helping, actually, with writing in general*. Through writing and reading, *I discovered that I really like super suspenseful and dramatic stories. Most people like fantasy,*

rainbow, super happy stories, but I like stories where all the chapters leave on a cliff hanger except for the last one.

This year, Zoe wrote a piece for an "*author's choice*" assignment *entitled, "A Bigger World", about time travel and dimensions and stuff – like sci-fi. I wrote about two kids. They find this time machine thing and they go inside it and start pressing buttons for some reason and then they get transported to like a different dimension or something. It was almost five pages. The teacher had it on a little cork board and posted them on the wall. So* [everyone] *could just look at it and read it. I feel proud of it. The teacher said that all of our writings were really great. She didn't say which ones were the favorites, but she gave everyone a little piece of candy or like a pencil. I got this little tiny Skittles packet. It's nice to write something and give it to someone even if you're feeling really nervous.* Then, *later they come out and tell everyone that it was really great. It just kind of lifts your spirits.* Zoe values the positive feedback from her teacher and the little reward she received for completing a final product.

Toward the end of the semester, during our final interview, Zoe reflected on her positive experiences with essays. She had recently written two additional non-fiction essays: one on microbes, and one on Jacques Cousteau. *I thought it was really good that we were writing a lot of essays because I got to practice typing. I'm really slow at typing. And I knew that if I'm in high school or college, I would probably need to write a lot of essays, like every single day. Since we write a lot of essays with her, I think, if we didn't have those assignments then I wouldn't be as good at writing*. Once more, Zoe demonstrates a scope of positive school writing experiences, where she recognizes value, merit, and personal progress.

Not always a choice. While Zoe speaks positively regarding school writing, it mostly pertains to the free writing, or *author's choice* assignments. With [school] *writing we usually all*

do the same thing, except for the author's choice. We don't get to choose what we're doing, unless it's author's choice, which is once a week, maybe twice. But it's usually really fun. The only writing I'm not that good at writing about is informative and opinion. I'm not good at opinion, because I just write like, "I like this because it's good," and then I get stumped.

Therefore, there are some aspects of school writing that Zoe would like to change. For one, Zoe believes school writing typically consists of only *narratives, informatives, opinions. Every once in a while, we should have something super fun. We only did the authors choice once where it was regular assignment. I do not like informative and opinion writing.* With *informative, you've got to do like 30 minutes of research for like two sentences. And opinion, it's hard to convince or persuade people if you're not even talking to anyone.* Here, Zoe calls attention to the lack of authentic, or socially-rooted writing in which she is communicating with an audience for an authentic purpose. While she doesn't favor opinion writing, she's not entirely opposed to it *because I kind of like arguing,* especially, *when I win.*

Not only are writing prompts and genres not always a choice, but Zoe also shares a critique on the way in which her teacher asks students to share their writing aloud. All students must participate in the unpredictable and spontaneous "call on" system. *When we share, she has this bucket of sticks with everyone's name on it, like basically every teacher has, and she just picks out a name and you just kind of have to go up there, unless you have a good reason or excuse why you don't. Then you have to go to the center of the room and talk about your writing and read it out, even if it's like two words. Thankfully she doesn't choose me much, because there's like 19 other kids in the class. When she does, which has been two or three times, I'm usually pretty comfortable with it. But there was this one time when I was barely finished writing. Everyone had like three pages, but I couldn't think of what to write, so I only had like*

two paragraphs. Sometimes it's hard to come up with ideas for writing, since we're not allowed to use computers to search up resources. Like I know what I'm writing about, but I don't know how to put it on words, like on the paper. Anyway, *I got really nervous and I just said, "I need to go to the bathroom," and then I kind of just hid out. She's kind of hard on us about like deadlines and when we should finish.* Although Zoe considers herself to be a strong writer, the limitations of choice, freedom, and decision-making in her school writing experience, occasionally lead her to a sense of frustration.

No Purpose for Politics in the Classroom

Zoe desires a peaceful classroom that does not involve tensions and disagreements among the students. A passionate reader and bright young mind, Zoe struggles with the need for critical and sociopolitical issues to enter the classroom or school writing. In this way, she is also challenged to find a space to write in her identity as a Black girl.

Avoid controversy to respect diversity. As Zoe and I discuss her ELA schedule this year, she shares her excitement over the current novel her teacher has selected for her reading group, *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000). Here I learn of Zoe's feelings of disinterest in writing about or discussing critical topics like race and politics. She doesn't spend a great amount of time at home or at school writing about discussing critical topics. *It's two hours, from 9:00 to 11:00, so for an hour and a half we do writing and the rest of the time we do reading. I like reading mostly, because we're reading this book called* Esperanza Rising (Ryan, 2000). I share with Zoe that I am familiar with the novel but confess I have never read it. *It's really good. You should read it. Yeah, her dad works on this ranch. I don't want to spoil it.* I ask Zoe about any writing assignments she's done thus far in relation to the book. *We've done like a few worksheets. We did this quiz, which we didn't have to restate the question, which is helpful. It wasn't like we*

got extra credit. It was just like a little easier, but some people did [restate the question] *for some reason and it took them like 10 extra minutes. Because they're like essay writing on those two little lines. It's just like fine print writing.* The *Esperanza* writing assignment Zoe describes *was just like 20 questions on the quiz. It was really easy. We were allowed to go back into the book. Not for complete answers, just to like, "Oh, okay, it's this."*

I know that *Esperanza Rising* (Ryan, 2000) tells the story of young migrant who, once wealthy in Mexico. is forced to migrate to the United States. She finds herself, along with her family working farms and trying to survive as a now poor family during the Great Depression. The text offers much in terms of critical analysis and connection to the migrant experience today. I wonder if Zoe has touched on any of these themes in the novel, outside of the comprehension questions she recently completed. *No. Not really. We talked about it for like five minutes one time, because some kid brought it up. They asked what the plot of the story would probably be if it was now.* I marvel at the depth and complexity of the question posed by Zoe's classmate. *We probably would have talked about it for like 30 more minutes if class didn't end and we had to move on. My teacher was able to keep it like not breaking out into a big argument over like who's better and what issues ... Yeah, she kind of cut it off early. It was kind of useful that we had to move on or else some kid probably would be like, "Wait, what if this happened?" Usually, like in most classrooms, the teacher answers the question and then some kid pipes in and then eventually the whole class is talking about it until the teacher is like, "Okay."* Zoe reaffirms her preference to move on from the politically-charged discussions and her contentment with the teacher to halt the conversation for purposes of classroom management or time constraints.

When I ask Zoe if she anticipates other opportunities to write and discuss immigration or migrant farm workers she says *not really, because it's just not what we do. Because since*

everyone in the school is basically completely different, we don't really talk about politics and like immigrants and stuff. It's kind of like just leave it alone. While Zoe values the diversity in her school environment, she feels that openly and pointedly discussing such diversity and sociopolitical issues connected to it could offend groups of students. Zoe also seems to point to the cultural norms of her school when she states, "*It's just not what we do*."

Furthermore, Zoe is not sure she is interested in learning the opinions of her classmates or letting those kinds of discussions play out. *I don't like it when everyone gets into a big argument about politics and stuff. It's really kind of annoying because the amount of times that happens, not at school, but is kind of annoying, because the amount of stuff that's happening and everyone like going insane over everything.* I challenge Zoe to consider school writing spaces where there are no arguments, but simply a question posed for her to write about privately as an individual student: "Zoe, what do you think about this issue? Where do you stand on this? *I'll probably just say that I don't really get involved with it. Like I don't really pay attention to it much, because I don't want to get dragged into everyone yelling and fighting over who's better or what we should do about this and that.*

Although I attempt to help Zoe envision writing about sociopolitical topics free from contentious and argumentative discourse, she reverts back to this concern, and distances herself from the negativity. In terms of race talk at school, *No. It's kind of one of the things that like you'll get in trouble for talking about, because the teachers are kind of cautious about it, because, yeah, everyone's equal. The teachers, they don't want anyone having bad ... not bad opinions, but thinking stuff they shouldn't have and talking about it. There's no real reason for anyone to talk about it at school. Because no one really talks about politics or anything, unless there's something super big going on.* If the teacher were to incorporate these topics, Zoe

believes *it'd cause a little stir…but I think everyone would mostly be fine, be chill with it. No one would really overreact that much if a teacher just mentioned it. I think they would overreact if a teacher shared their* [own] *opinion that a bunch of people have different opinions on, unless it's something that everyone agrees on. Usually it would probably cause a big uproar or something. We don't really talk ... I'm just assuming what would happen. There's not any examples. Politics is something we just don't really talk about. It's not like banned, but it's just something that you just kind of don't talk about at school.* Zoe positions socio-politics as a kind of null curriculum. She is forming an understanding of what politics mean, by actively not discussing or writing about politics.

When I ask Zoe if she ever talks about race or sociopolitical issues within her friend group, she says *No, because usually there's no reason to. If there was anything happening near us, like somewhere around* [state] *or* close to [state], *then we'd probably talk about it, but it would just be a little small talk.* It seems our current, divisive, and highly political times have shaped Zoe's disinterest and distance from sociopolitical topics. For Zoe, such topics are negative because of the potential for disagreement and the possibility of offending groups of her classmates Also, it is seen as unnecessary. She is not interested in participating in these topics as sites of activism or agency and avoids them if possible. *I don't have many super strong opinions, like political opinions. It's kind of like if someone says my favorite TV show or something is bad, I get super angry.* Zoe names *third world stuff* as one social area of concern for her. *We learned about that last year a lot. How they don't have technology, not many clean water, they don't have great homes and stuff. That's kind of one of the only things.*

Outside of third-world issues, Zoe does not believe her teachers take a critical approach to writing. She admits opportunities to write critically and from socially-conscience point of

view are lacking in her writing instruction and school writing experience. *No, we haven't done that approach. I think my teacher mentioned doing it like the third or fourth quarter of the year but she said she didn't decide if we should or not. It depends on how much progress we made. Because she said we might do it in middle school. I think I agree with her. Since the school kinda stays away from politics and stuff, I think, even only having the fifth graders doing it ... I think that the last quarter or so is like a good deadline. I think when I grow up I want to do some writing like that. Like maybe for an article in the news or something*. For Zoe, critical, sociopolitical writing is best reserved for the future, and for Zoe's teachers sociopolitical writing is not a priority until the end of the school year after other writing standards have been met.

I question whether Zoe thinks she would learn anything from writing about critical topics like immigration, civil rights, or environmental issues like the Flint water crisis if she were given the opportunity to write about them now as a fifth grader. *Yeah, I think.* Because Zoe's school environment plays a role in her perception of critical writing, I also wonder if Zoe feels equipped to write about these issues. *Probably. A lot of people in my class are kind of sensitive. I don't know why. Probably because everyone stays inside their little friend groups or something so they just like don't really talk to any other like students or classmates.* Zoe believes she is currently prepared and equipped to write within a critical-sociopolitical genre but maintains that this type of writing is best suited for the end of her fifth-grade year. She continues to have mixed feeling on whether critical, socio-political writing should be an integral part of the curriculum.

Zoe adopts a similar stance when it comes to discussing these topics in the comforts of her home. When I ask Zoe if she and family spend time discussing race, or what it's like to be a Black family, she says, *Not really. No. Not much*. At home, conversations about race come up *every now and then. It's usually once every three months or so. Usually on the news there was*

some random thing that was caused by race, and we have to talk about it. That doesn't happen often. It's usually when we all notice something on the news, which is pretty rare, because all of us, we usually don't watch the news, except for my dad. In terms of discussion of political topics at home, *no. Since it's just us three usually it's usually me and my sister fighting over who did this or where the remote is. So we kind of wouldn't have time to over all the yelling.* Zoe doesn't spend a lot of time talking with her dad about the president or anything either *because usually he's either working or taking a nap. (Taking a nap is like 90% of the time).* Overall, Zoe doesn't spend a lot of time discussing race or sociopolitical topics at home with her family, and she is just fine that.

Identity politics. Zoe and I discuss whether she ever had the opportunity in school to write about her identity as a young, Black girl. *I would say I'm Black, like just ... I don't know*. In terms of writing about being a Black girl in school writing, *not really, because our teacher, like most basically everyone, kind of wants to avoid the topic of like race and politics, as I mentioned before. I mean, we can* [write and talk about those topics]*, but…no*. If Zoe were to write a story about her experience as a Black girl, *it wouldn't be super sad and emotional. It would just be like a story. It would basically be like a two-page autobiography. People in general don't really have like any reason to prove anything, because no one's judgmental. Everyone's fine the way they are. No one's life is messed up because they have freckles or something from my school*. In other words, because there are no negative or controversial issues or stories surrounding her identity as a Black girl, Zoe doesn't see a need to write about it.

Furthermore, in Zoe's school writing experience, these words simply don't come up. There is no need to write them on the paper. *No, not really. Surprisingly, not many people in the class write about actual humans. Everyone usually writes about being like a rainbow unicorn cat*

or something. Someone wrote about being an eraser. Zoe highlights the scope of writing that she and her peers tend to play in when given the choice to free write – playful, imaginative, fantasy, and sci-fi. She struggles to find a space or a reason why someone, including herself, may purposefully or thoughtfully write about race. However, Zoe feels that teachers and the school do play a role in helping to learn about herself and her identity, but only in surface level ways. *What we do in school is basically, it helps to discover what you like, what you're good at, and what you need to practice more at.*

Meet Devin

I note the quaintness and charm of the neighborhood as I drive along the streets to get to Devin's house. I pull up to a craftsman style home with a large front porch and a big, beautiful tree that shades the front yard. I am greeted by Devin's mother, followed by her father, both of whom are practicing attorneys. I also receive a brief introduction to Devin's fifth-grade brother. It's a late, sunny Saturday afternoon and 9-year-old Devin is wearing overalls and a pink shirt when I first meet her. She is in fourth grade. Her natural hair is in thin twists that frame her face and fall just below her chin. Devin's skin is a rich cocoa brown complexion and she smiles politely when I talk to her. Devin's mom asks if I prefer the dining room table or gestures to a sitting room just off the hallway near the entrance. The room has a beautiful, gray tufted sofa, and two arm chairs that face it on the other side of stone coffee tables. The room is peaceful and decorated in a way that can be described as modern, simple, and warm. I scan the room and state my preference to spend our interview session there. As I set up and peer into the hallway, I notice the deep red wall color in the hallway and framed family photos neatly arranged on the wall and buffet table.

Devin and I both sit on the couch facing each other. During the first half of our interview, Devin was reserved and cautious. As time went by and she became more comfortable, I saw a relaxed side emerge allowing me to glean a bubbly and joyful personality. As I say goodbye in the doorway after our first session, I share this insight with the family. Devin's mom replies, "Yes, if you didn't get bubbly, you didn't get Devin." When I ask Devin to tell me a little about herself, she quickly shares: *My favorite color is pink. My favorite animal is a dolphin. My favorite food is a hamburger and my favorite subjects are math and ELA*. Devin enjoys reading and recently completed the *Harry Potter* series. *In summer I ended on book five and then I finished, six, seven, and eight*. This was followed by a binge-watching session of the movies. *The whole week I'd watch the first one, the second one, the third one, the fourth one. One of those days I just doubled them. My brother and my dad watched the first one, then my brother just gave up on them. My dad and my mom just watched the seventh one with me.* In addition to reading, Devin enjoys playing the recorder and practicing math skills when she's not in school. For instance, s*ometimes I'll just get the flash cards*. She's also involved in track, soccer, swimming, and tennis.

Devin's close group of friends share a variety of differences and commonalities. *Some of them are White and some of them are Black. Isabelle and Ava are White. Sophie and London are Black. Some of them do more sports than me. Some of them just do a lot more crafts together. One thing we have alike is that we all like to have fun together and we also like to do the same stuff. We all like to do either one sport or another the same*. When I ask Devin if there are a lot of Black kids in her neighborhood, she can only name one other family. But says, *Yes. Sophie and Taylor* (sisters) *are down there, we're down here. I don't know most of my neighbors though.*

Although Devin's combination of school/neighborhood friends reflect somewhat of a racial balance, the racial demographics of her school are different. It has *a good population of Black kids, but there's still more White kids. There's not a little amount of Black kids, but compared to the White kids there's a little of them – but there's a lot*. In Devin's class the racial demographics shift even more to reflect a minority Black population. *Last year there was only three of us. This year I think there's only three of us again. Three Blacks and the rest are White. It doesn't really have any feelings on me. I just notice it. It's such a big school that they separate us so that each class gets a handful or so.* Given the large population of the school (over *a thousand kids),* Devin feels this approach of spreading out the Black children in each class makes sense, and that it wouldn't necessarily *matter* if *more Black kids were in one class.*

For Devin, school is *just school – not really that interesting*. Although she does not get overly excited when she talks about school and writing, Devin is thoughtful in her reflections and can articulate in great detail several aspects of her life and day-to-day school experiences. At one point while discussing school writing, Devin hops from the sofa to get her Student-led Conference binder. *I think I still have them, in fact*, referencing several of her writing pieces. I pause the recorder so she can get her binder featuring a collection of her special art, Spanish, and writing pieces from Kindergarten to third grade. She intently flips through the pages pointing out various pieces to me. *This is what we all start at. Then we write all these pieces*. *In kindergarten I was bad at spelling, very sadly. In first grade I had Mrs. Powell and we wrote this*. Devin gestures to a piece in the binder. (Devin has the binder sitting on the coffee table for me to look at in greater depth on our second interview).

When I ask Devin about her future aspirations, she simply states, *I just want to become*

a veterinarian. She is not sure where her parents went to college, but she wants to attend a local state university. These are two things she has figured out. Unlike her older brother, Sean, who *has his whole life planned out. He knows his job, he knows what car he wants, he knows what kind of family he wants*. All of which Devin finds *odd*. Devin's parents are actively involved in the schools' Parent Teacher Organization, and volunteer regularly. This appears to be a source of pride for her. *My dad is PTO so he gets all the money and spends it on equipment for the school to make it a better school. So sometimes I see him at school. Sometimes my mom comes to field trips with us*.

Views on Class and Privilege

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being poor and 10 being rich, Devin would rate her family a *five because we're not poor but we're not rich. We're in the middle, 'cause we still have lots of time to buy presents*. *Like, the other day it was Sean's birthday and so we got him a present. Well, we got him a lot of presents. We got him like three presents each. forty bucks each I guess. Grandma gave him money*. *Just the other year we were able to buy a vacuum cleaner and an iPad.* Another class indicator for Devin is travel. *Next week, we're going on vacation, depending if my dad has to work.*

Devin believes most people in her community have a similar lifestyle as her family because *our houses aren't that different, except some houses* [in the neighborhood] *are bigger. That one's a monster!* Devin references a million-dollar home a few doors down. Within her friend group, she also feels her peers live a similar lifestyle. *Our houses aren't that different from each other's and we have the same types of clothing sometimes. We sometimes do the same activities*: s*occer, swimming, tennis sometimes, same camps*. Devin feels that most of the other Black children in her school are on the same socioeconomic status, but admits *I don't know most*

of them. But I don't really get to know them. Other students could *probably* be on a lower income level, but she isn't sure. She is unable to identity how she may be similar or different to other Black students at her school.

Devin attributes her class status to her parent's careers. They *are both lawyers*. *My parents got jobs so that we can do fun stuff together. They can come to school for like field trips and they're still able to make money. No offense to my parents. They get paid really well. And they help innocent child life,* by doing some philanthropic-oriented work. But *it's so boring, you have to stand behind a computer all day,* or *you have to sit down all day. You don't have any excitement in the day*. For Devin, income is the determining factor of a "good job." *A good job is a good job that gets paid. And it might not even be fun.* However, money is not the sole factor in Devin's dream job. *A vet, what I'm planning to be, gets you money and it's fun.*

Devin recognizes extreme social class privileges between middle-class and poverty. *I like helping the homeless.* Once when Devin was *finished getting my hair done, we drive by this curve. This one time I saw this homeless dude in this hospital gown. It was odd. I thought we should probably help him some day, but we didn't let him in the car*. *It's more important to me because there are people out in the street and they have no food and they're dying there. And they have no home. Sometimes they're with children. Sometimes they don't know when they're gonna have their next meal. We are eating all the food and wasting it.* Devin has an understanding of poverty and class levels. With that, she did not recognize or identify many class differences between her and the children at her school. This perception could be attributed to the commonalities among class status among most of her peers and friends.

The Other Things We Learn from School Writing

A host of skills can be mastered in the school writing curriculum. A new body of knowledge can be gained, and a variety of topics can be explored. Devin's understanding of school writing reaches beyond these facets. She parses out technical writing skills versus conceptual aspects of writing and identifies a purpose for learning both. Opinionated and savvy, Devin's views on school writing are not always favorable, as she points to areas of concern about lack of choice, and difficulty interpreting feedback.

Writing is framed by skills and genre. For Devin, school writing is viewed as skill-oriented, information-based, and career-related. She sees the greater purposes for her school writing assignments, but she does not always embrace in-school writing positively. Devin's personal feelings toward writing center largely on the skills involved in the act of writing. She repeatedly notes handwriting, spelling, and punctuation as her main concerns when composing. *I don't really like writing. It makes my hand hurt. When I write, I don't really like my handwriting*. *I don't really like writing because it's not my favorite subject and I don't like writing down things. My handwriting is not that neat, but that doesn't stop me from writing. It hurts my hand*. *My worst worry is always that I'm putting the wrong punctuation down. Now that I'm in fourth grade, it kind of matters now. Unlike in kindergarten I could get away with it. Just like I could spell "funny" wrong and get away with it. Now I have to spell it the right way*.

When I ask Devin if she thinks she's a good writer, she first addresses her ability as a speller. *I know how to spell a lot of words. I still don't know how to spell "elephant" correctly*, but *I can spell most of the words. We just took a spelling test on Friday. They were really easy questions, like how do you spell "bed" and "spoil."* Devin feels she is a good speller and believes that spelling and writing relate to each other. *While you're writing, you can't write*

without knowing how to spell. But, *I don't think you have to be good at spelling to be a good writer. You can have really neat handwriting but forget a couple of words like "elephant" or "light bulb."* I ask Devin to share some other things that make people good writers. Once more, she refers to skill-based and technical aspects of writing. *Well, good handwriting and knowing how to spell somewhat. Sometimes it's just knowing how to spell and neat handwriting. Otherwise, if you don't have good handwriting no one can read what you have on your paper. Even if it is correct spelling.* While Devin believes you can still be a good writer without correct spelling and neat handwriting, she identifies these skills as intricately bound in order to communicate one's thoughts through writing.

Devin evaluates her own status as a writer by stating, *I guess I'm descriptive. I'm not really a writer 'cause I don't really write all the time on my free time and stuff. I'm really much of a reader. I write stuff but that's only because I have to do it to learn. I wouldn't do it on my free time. My free time I do more arts and crafts and I don't really write a lot.* Devin positions writing as a mostly school-based activity that she is forced to do, as opposed to a hobby to enjoy in her free time. However, she soon recalls some writing she did on a Saturday morning. *Now that I think about it, I have done a writing piece recently.*

Devin pulls up a Power Point slide show on her computer. *It's for my friend Isabelle. It was her birthday. And I went to her party yesterday, so I made this slide for her.* One slide reads *Happy Birthday Isabelle*. Other slides feature photos of a dog that Devin recently learned about in class. *And Mr. Baker* [current teacher] *knows really good stories, so I used information and non-fiction in my writing. I did it yesterday morning. And Mr. Baker, he told us about the Sergeant Stubby, our great dog in the military and so he reminds me of my friend because she's a good person, so was Sergeant Stubby. And then I used humor too.* Here, Devin writes freely and

creatively in her personal project, yet she draws on writing concepts she is learning about in class. Thus, cross over exists between her in-school and out-of-school writing experiences.

However, Devin mainly discusses in-school writing in terms of skills. She connects these skills to both the concept of correctness as well future career success. *Sometimes what bothers me when I'm writing is that I can't read what I wrote. Sometimes it's too big and then I have to erase it all and then write it all over again smaller. And sometimes what bothers me is that sometimes my writing is completely inaccurate. Like we're doing the main idea or the topic and I think it's one thing and it's really the other. I mean most of the time I end up writing the supporting detail, so I end up having to erase that after I shrinked it and then rewrite the whole thing –shrink it and make sure it's accurate.* Devin is concerned about both the accuracy of her handwriting and the ability to correctly identify and discern between the main idea and supporting details of a text. She is bothered by the cognitive multi-tasking she must apply in school writing in order to ensure her work is correct.

I really do think [writing] *is important. I just don't like it. I think it's important because otherwise once you get out of school it's like you don't know how to write and you're sitting there in your business, when you've got a job and everything and they want you to write something down. You're like, "What?" It's like you don't know how to spell correctly and you need to work on your handwriting. You need to learn to write down things good and you need to learn how to spell. Spelling right can help you with how you speak your words. If you mean to spell brain and you spell Brian…It's like when you write down brain when people look at it, it's like, "Brian? Brian? I thought you were talking about brains." It's confusing. Also writing is important because when you need to spell.* Also, *it's like you don't know a paragraph from sentence.*

Devin believes writing will be important to her career and her future. She notices how people use writing in their jobs. *You would need to write down how long it's been going on, the prescription, and what happened. Just now I watched that all from a nurse. From a nurse, when you come into her office she writes down what happens. Then when I take my dog to the vet she writes down what happens. She takes a look at him and then she writes down what she sees and what she needs to do. I'd need to spell correctly. If you spell laughing gas ... it's L-A-U-G-H-I-N-G and you spelled it L-A-F-F-I-N-G they would look at you like, "Laffing gas, or do you mean laughing gas? That right there does not say laughing."*

During our final interview, Devin shared her latest writing piece – a narrative on the topic of her choice entitled, "*My so-called Thanksgiving Vacation.*" As Devin pulls up her Google Doc, she describes a comical story about her family and the many things that went wrong during her holiday break. I noticed that her teacher has included several detailed comments along the side of her document. I ask Devin about the feedback from her teacher, highlighting comments like,

> Devin, I really like how your writing lets your readers into your family. Very powerful. When we first learn to write stories, we learn to tell the events that happened. We tell what happened first, then next, then next. As we become strong writers though, it's important not just to write the external story, but also to write the internal story.

Although Devin typically addresses her teacher's feedback, she shares she is not sure what some of his feedback means. In this instance, *I actually have no idea what he was trying to say. No clue. Usually when he does it, it means that he thinks that we could make it better. Oh, I've got a lot of capitalization errors.* After reading several of her teacher's comments that compliment her writing and encourage Devin to incorporate more dialogue and to highlight the emotions and

responses of the characters in her story, I remark on the substantive feedback she's received. Devin feels *that's 'cause I have a lot of capitalization errors.* I challenge Devin here. Although her teacher has highlighted some capitalization errors, it does not reflect the entire scope of his feedback, or her writing. Nevertheless, Devin is somewhat fixated on her technical writing errors as opposed to her broader content ideas. Indeed, when I ask Devin how her teacher makes her feel about her personal writing, she explains, *He helps me realize that I make a lot of mistakes in the capitalization. And also punctuation. Capitalization and punctuation, not my strongest. So I need to go back through there and have periods, quotation marks, commas, exclamation points, question marks. Yeah, and capitalize my letters.* In Devin's case, her technical writing skills and errors have seemingly become more important to her than they are to her teacher.

The illusion of choice. Devin describes the writing she does in school as *learningful* because *you can learn a lot.* She also describes it as *non-fiction because most of the time, it's more of a non-fiction, so it's like information that's true. It's not really made up, it's all true.* So far in the school year, *we haven't written any narratives yet or any fiction ones.* A heavy emphasis on informative and opinion writing in third and fourth grade have led Devin to view school writing as 1) rooted in nonfiction, and 2) lacking in student choice. Much of what Devin writes can be considered research reports or argumentative opinion pieces. *I remember this assignment on you have to choose an animal. Well, insect-ish thing. You don't really choose it, but you get assigned an insect. I got firefly. You had to research it so that when you made your insect you could label its things. I found out that they were experimenting on fireflies to cure cancer. I just read the books. Sometimes I went online. Basically, we're drawing it out. You're making a diagram, you are labeling it, you were figuring out how it looked. You were finding out how it survives.* Drawing on her humorous and bubbly nature, Devin adds, *one thing is for sure.*

Fireflies do not taste good. When I ask Devin what made this writing assignment memorable she states, *well, because it was fun and back then I had good handwriting. I don't know why.*

As referenced in Devin's third grade firefly report, with in-school writing *you don't have as much freedom about what you're gonna write about. I mean you still have a choice, but just like already choices for you. And like at home, you can make your own piece and you can just write about what you want, but at school you have this certain topic and the certain kind* [genre] *and it's like the teacher says make an opinion piece about one of these four choices. You pick the one you feel strongest about and then you write a piece. But it's not like having your own decision –like saying, "I'm gonna do a fantasy or a non-fiction or about jobs." It's more like they decide. They give you your options or sometimes they just give you one topic. It's not fair. We need more decisions. In this opinion piece, what if everyone wants to write a fantasy piece?* Devin comments on the fact that she rarely has the freedom or time in school to develop a writing piece on the topic or genre of her choice.

Yet there are exceptions to this rule. In third grade, *towards the beginning and end of the year we get this time where you have 45 minutes to write a story, fiction or nonfiction*. This year, *Mr. Baker, that's my fourth-grade teacher gives us 10-15 minutes to write at the end of the day. It can be anything we want. We can draw too. Sometimes I like just writing words, even though it annoys me to look at my handwriting. Sometimes I draw pictures to match what I wrote yesterday or the day before. But most of the time I read.* Devin experiences student choice in writing at the beginning or end of the school year, when teachers tend to have more flexibility in the content and schedule. In the middle of the school year, however Devin affirms *we don't have time.*

Third-Grade Writing Experiences

Third grade writing marks a shift in the demands of school writing. Expectations increase in text complexity and structure, and students are introduced to new processes to compose a text. As a fourth grader, Devin reflects on her third grade writing and what she took away from her experiences.

Routine writing instruction. As Devin reflects on her third-grade writing experiences, she recalls the writing instruction she received in third grade. On a scale of 1-10, she rates her third-grade teacher's writing instruction an *eight. I give her an eight because she helped us write really, really long paragraphs. I used to write two-sentence paragraphs, which I wouldn't consider a paragraph, but it was a paragraph. She had us writing five-sentences-or-more paragraphs, so it actually looked more like a paragraph and not two sentences.* S*he had us writing topics. We had to think, and we had these reading passages that we read. Then we took what we thought about those and what the gist is. Then we wrote down what we thought*. *I would have given her a ten but my handwriting's still not that neat. My handwriting, you cannot read clearly. You have to be like, "Is this an eight or is it a six? Sometimes my mom and dad ask me what this letter is or number.* Although Devin stresses handwriting as a personal concern, she says her teacher only *sometimes* mentioned it to her, and the students in class never did. *Their handwriting wasn't any better than mine,* but *I need to learn to write better.* Despite these concerns, Devin says her handwriting doesn't deter her from writing.

When I ask Devin to describe what her typical third grade writing lessons looked like, she describes a lesson that includes a heavy emphasis on phonics instruction coupled with vocabulary. These components are followed by the reading of a passage or book, and independent writing time that relates to the passage or book. *Mainly, we're sitting at our desks.*

She's in the front and she's writing down words and we follow them. Sometimes she'll have these cutouts and she'll want us to cut out the words. Then she'll want us to write down which category they're in. For example, *double vowels. Fourth grade there's OU. She'd have us put those in one category and the one vowel words in another and the vowels that say their names in another, the vowels that don't say their names in another one. Once you finish sorting them out, she would have you do these activities and she'd have you write sentences with them. Crazy sentences. Part of the time we would learn our vowel sounds. We put together the words and we would read a book. We would figure out all the hard words, then she would explain what they meant. Afterward, we would write the gist of that passage or the book.*

In third grade, Devin spent a great amount of time writing what she calls *ELAs,* or the *gist* of a text as mentioned above. In these writing assignments Devin was required to find the *learning gists of a passage that you read.* Devin reflects on these writing experiences as particularly boring and unenjoyable. *I read this one about the book* Rain School. *What happened was there were kids who had to build their own school with the help of a teacher. They learned, and then the school got destroyed because of the rain. Then they just built it up again. It was so boring. I did them for every week. Sometimes they were tests. You had to work in silence. You had these things that you couldn't see other people's papers. I don't know why, but sometimes she just turned off one of the lights. Then she turned on music and we would write down our answers*.

The *learning gists* Devin routinely composed were approximately two paragraphs in length. *It's basically like a summary except it's about the book that you just read about* and *what you think they learned from the experience*. *You have to use some of your own words and you have to write what you got from the book; write what you thought the gist was.* [The teacher]

said there was no right or wrong answer, but… Sometimes that was our writing time. Sometimes that was our test time. You would take the test and then later on that day you would have writing.

Devin's third grade writing time was routine-based and involved a variety of literacy skills. Because Devin is an avid reader, I wondered about the literacy opportunities surrounding multicultural texts. She recalls reading a great amount of passages and short story books, but when I ask Devin whether she recently read any books with main characters who are Black, or Black girls specifically, she quickly replies, *Oh yeah, I got tons of those*. I clarify by asking if these are books Devin has selected on own, or books that the teacher has asked the class to read in school. *Well, sometimes it's on my own.* Rain School, *there was a bunch of Black guys. Then sometimes over the summer one of the girls in* Harry Potter *is Black.* I clarify once more and ask whether Devin's writing and literacy time included teacher-assigned books with Black children or families as the main characters. Other than the story *Rain School, not that I can remember*.

Devin feels as though she did a lot of school writing last year. Mainly because it was integrated to all content areas. *We had a test each Friday and then to top it off we had three tests each week. Then she had us writing ELAs and all sorts of writing prompts, and towards the end of the day we had math and then we had stations. Stations you do writing. There's only two in which you go on the computer. We ended up writing most of the day and most of the week. In reading we'd write ELA's. In math we would write the problems and the answer. In writing, well you always have to write.* There are not a lot of creative-based writing opportunities in *third or fourth grade because we're learning specifically on different kinds of pieces of writing*. *Some of the subjects we do on the computer too. We do math, ELA, there's science on there. We also write in science. If you didn't finish your work you had to put in this folder called Unfinished Work. When you have some spare time, you have to finish that, which is more writing*. Devin's

school writing experiences are embedded across the curriculum. As a result, she recognizes writing as a natural part of learning in school.

When I ask Devin how she feels about so much writing, she is more concerned with the physical act itself. *I feel like why? Why do we have to write? Why can't we use the computer and type it? We need to do more typing.* Devin references the end-of-year state achievement test and the fact that she spent most of the year using paper and pencil for writing, but *you end up typing on the computer. It's like then we aren't really that prepared. Some of the people were still going* ...(Devin mimics a hunt and peck motion with her fingers over a keyboard). *Even though I was going like that, I was pretty slow. You just had to type it down, but it was really important that you spelled it right, because it's on the computer and they're not going to ask you, "What did you mean? What did you mean to write?"* Although each student had their own Chromebook, Devin feels she did not have enough practice on it to efficiently type her essay for the end-of-year state test. Fortunately for Devin, her school relies not only on technology, but paper-based writing portfolios.

The power of portfolio. Devin's writing portfolio is highlighted multiple times as an artifact that reflects her journey as a writer from Kindergarten to third grade. Devin refers to her student-led conference binder several times over the span of our interviews. Her binder is filled with multiple writing pieces, which include drafts and final pieces. These writing pieces include topics such as helping the homeless, "How do you know you're ready to go to [Preston]?", a letter in Spanish, art work, and music work. Devin is proud of this binder and the collection of progress and achievement it represents. She flips through the pages and reflects aloud. *In kindergarten I was bad at spelling, very sadly. I spelled my last name wrong.*

I comment on the multiple drafts and graphic organizers that preface many of her writing pieces. *This is what we all start at. Then we write all these pieces*. In terms of using graphic organizers to begin the writing process, *that's how my teacher preferred it. That way it's like we don't have to think through the whole process and we don't know anything to write. Most of the time I'm just sitting there thinking. It's like you don't have a first, second, third, fourth, or fifth* paragraph. *But if you use a graphic organizer it helps you break all of that down into sections. You can edit it and then you can combine that on a new paper. Then you write it down. Every time I'm writing something I end up going through the* writing process. *'Cause in my binder, it shows the process of my writing with a rough draft.* I ask Devin when they have time to write multiple drafts and work on their writing pieces. *We'll have an hour to write. Unless it's a different day like it's the first day of school or the first week of school or the last day of school*. She reaffirms her theory that writing time flexes with these pivotal points of the school year.

Devin feels that there are other important things she gained in her third-grade writing instruction. *Well, she did teach us how to ... what's it called? It's in one of my papers. Yes. Indent.* As Devin reviews one of the writing pieces in her binder she comments, *Oh, I forgot to indent on this paper*. I listen to Devin reflect on her writing pieces and note the ways in which she recognizes her own personal development and growth as a writer. She is in tune with what she believes she was supposed to learn from school writing, and reflects on the reality of her progress. I see more of this awareness as Devin shares some of her most recent fourth grade writing experiences.

Fourth-Grade Writing Experiences

Devin believes she has grown as a writer in her fourth-grade year and points to a variety of experiences to convey this feeling. She shares what she has gained from technology, research,

and group collaboration and analyzes the challenges that come with these elements of school writing.

Recognizing development as a writer. Devin shares how she learned to write an opinion essay this year. *I learned about the body paragraphs and the introductory paragraph 'cause last year, our teacher didn't have us doing this. She just had us writing it down on paper and it was just like, first you do the first introductory paragraph. Then do a body paragraph and another body paragraph and then a conclusion. And so my introductory paragraph looked way different. All my introductory paragraphs had was those two sentences.* In Devin's fourth grade class this year with Mr. Baker, *we did it paragraph by paragraph, part by part, so first we started out with the introduction paragraph. And so he said state our reasons why we believe this and give like three or four reasons. But don't give that much details. And then he said, add a link in comments so that you can get to that body paragraph. And so, then you go first paragraph or second paragraph. So it lines up, so let's say the first in my introductory paragraph, and then you go to the first paragraph, it gives details about that first detail. I can show you right now what my opinion piece is*. Devin's explanation of how to organize an argumentative essay highlights her conceptual understanding of the writing structure. She pulls up her Google doc and proudly shows me her writing. *Why I think dogs are better than cats by Devin Smithson. I like it. I feel strongly that it demonstrates how I feel about dogs, 'cause cats hurt*.

Typing becomes easier. This year, as a fourth grader, Devin is assigned a touch screen Chromebook to use in school. Although she had a Chromebook as a third grader, I notice how her experiences with typing and technology access change her outlook on writing as the fourth-grade school year progresses. *We do more writing on the paper. But we use our computer to read passages, like in reading.* She also shows me a Google Doc that holds several of her current

writing assignments. *We're going into fourth grade and we're doing a lot of typing. I guess they give us some chances to type, but most people, they don't do a good job of supervising us. 'Cause most people are like* [typing slowly]. *So it's like how are we supposed to learn it if you're not helping us, really? It's just like setting us up*. Although Devin complains about the need to learn to type faster, *I feel good. I'm pretty fast at it.*

Frustration with research. After a few months in fourth grade, Devin is engaged in a new writing assignment - *learning about a new country. I chose South Korea. I don't know why. We're doing research. We just type it down in our Chromebooks. We soaked up the information. Then we're doing introduction, body paragraph, and then conclusion.* Devin describes her research so far on the country's food, drinks, and national anthem. *It's kinda fun, but at the same time, when you don't find your information that you want ...* For instance, *we're not allowed to use just* [mainstream search engines] *cause that stuff tends to be wrong. One time, I was reading a passage about explorers, and it said that one of the explorers, after he died, made the automobile. Which was made a lot later. And they said Christopher Columbus died before he lived. The date in the front was a later time than the date in the back.*

Instead, Devin must research information using her school district's data bases such as Galileo and World Book. She likes World Book but finds both sources limiting and incomplete. *Like I want to find out the climate. I didn't find that until like last week. It was like none of the books that I checked out had some. None of the sites had any information about that.* I inquire about the possibility of collecting research at home to bring in to the school. *There's a media specialist. Since they don't trust Google, they say don't do it at home, either*. Here, I explain that Google is simply a bridge to other websites, and some sites are credible and some are not. Devin shares that the teachers *don't suggest anything. They're like, "You can't do this." I don't really*

think it's fair that we don't get to use some of the sites. Because there's a limited amount of sites [referring to her school district approved databases]. *We got to the library, but it's like sometimes they don't have any books about that country.*

Leadership is necessary in collaborating with peers. In fourth grade, Devin worked collaboratively on a persuasive writing piece with her 4-person *table group*. *We were learning about important historic facts and things about how we got our independence, like from King George and the colonies, and the Battle of Yorktown, Saratoga*. The piece *is about the Declaration of Independence for Children and the rights that we should have. It's basically like the Declaration of Independence, except it's for children and their rights.* Devin decided to take on the role of editor during this assignment. As her classmates submitted their ideas into the Google Doc, Devin spent time revising the content for coherency. *We all wrote it at one time. Basically, what I was doing, I wasn't really writing things down, but I was editing it. Like spelling-wise and their wording for it. Because usually, they would put things that didn't really make sense. I was like, "Don't you mean blah blah blah?" And they'd say, "Yeah." It's important that they can actually understand it because if you word it too wrongly, it's probably not gonna happen because* [the readers] *probably won't understand it*. It was important to Devin that the structure and organization of the document make sense. Thus, she opted to invest time editing and revising content to contribute to the piece in a more holistic way. Her focus on these elements are reflected in her own writing and were applied in this assignment for the benefit of the group.

Politeness over Politics in School Writing

Devin is an analytical thinker. She is curious to understand the root cause of broad social justice issues and has well-informed opinions about race in school. During our interviews she

articulates several challenges facing the Black community and her own experiences with race and politics. Despite her position, a gap exists between what Devin thinks and her opportunities to explore these thoughts through writing at school.

Race remains a thing of the past. Devin's writing experiences at school typically do not involve matters of race or politics. In fact, Devin *feels most teachers try to avoid it* [race]. *Sometimes if a kid says something about it then they'll be like, "You go to time out." They'll go on timeout because ... and then I see the look on my teacher's face. It's like she really means it. Sometimes the teacher just doesn't like* [talking about race] *because sometimes it might hurt someone's feelings the way they talk about it.* Devin feels like this tendency to shy away from race has been taken up by all of her teachers, no matter what race. *No, because I've had a variety of them. Kindergarten- Black, first grade-White, second grade-Black, third grade-White, and this year is another White. I don't see really any difference. They all teach us the historical-ness of writing. They basically teach us the same stuff in the same kind of like way, even though they say it or describe it differently, it's all the same to me.* Devin feels strongly that in her school experience, all teachers respond similarly when it comes to writing about or discussing race in the classroom; it is dismissed, avoided, or historicized. These routine responses from educators shape Devin's understanding of how race fits (and does not fit) into school and writing.

In some ways, Devin agrees with her teachers that race should be a limited topic for writing and discussing in the classroom. *Sometimes it can be a bad thing, but sometimes it's just a good thing.* She imagines how a hypothetical girl may experience race in difference ways. *The good way – you could say* [racism] *made her stronger. It made her more out and open to suggestions. In the bad way –you could say* [tauntingly], *"I'm white and you're not. I'm white and you're not." Actually, I've heard that quite a few times. I don't think we should really talk about it*

every single day, but a friendly reminder every week or so. For example, *I would say racism doesn't really matter because it doesn't matter what color you are. You're basically the same. Even if you're white, even if you're brown, it doesn't make any difference. It doesn't make sense that we went to war because there was white and there was brown. It doesn't make sense. Literally, it's just different colors. It doesn't mean that we get poor or they get poor. We shouldn't become slaves for it. We're basically equals. We're just different colors. It doesn't make sense*. If Devin had her own classroom, she would make it a point to *just say that we're all the same. We're all equals. It's not like we're fallen or they're fallen. We're equals. It doesn't matter if we're brown or white. We're equal.*

One common thread that unites the writing and discussion of race in Devin's school experience is history, particularly units related to civil rights or slavery. This is evidenced when I ask Devin if she ever gets the opportunity to write on critical, political topics, or topics related to race, or her identity as a young Black girl. *Well, this one time we wrote about Martin Luther King Jr. and what he did. And how he got shot and other people like that I guess, I don't know. That was basically it. That was the one time and that was in second grade, or it was in third grade.* Actually, *it was in both.* She mentions some other Black historical figures she's written about in relation to race, like *the mayor, or the judge* that she can't quite remember the names of. *Sometimes we were learning about this new judge and how she was important to the ... I forgot the name of it, but how she was important to whatever the name was. I mean I guess we should learn about the historical Black people. Like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Junior, someone else I can't remember. So that we can get a better understanding on life back then and the something, something thousands,* referring to the 1800s and 1900s.

Devin discusses these figures in somewhat of an apathetic manner. She's a little fuzzy on the details but quickly runs down a list of who she perceives to be hallmark historical Black figures. For Devin, these key people represent a single and recurring theme of Blackness in school curriculum. She has heard their stories over and over again and identifies them as the cornerstone of writing about anything to do with race in school. However, she feels the significance schools place on Black figures of the past is warranted for two reasons: First, *I mean today there's not a lot of famous Black people doing things like standing up for themselves. I mean it's still on the news but it's not as special as it was back then. Because Whites believed it a lot more; that they were better than us a lot further back then right now 'cause right now we're kind of equal*. Devin intentionally uses the phrase "kind of equal" because *I think some people disagree about that. But we've been equal and back then it was like the Whites thought they were the kings and we were their servants.* I take this opportunity to let Devin know about Alicia Garza, credited with founding the Black Lives Matter Movement, but I agree that we don't talk much about the famous Black activists of today in school. I ponder with Devin, "Who are they?" "Are they standing up? "What are they doing?" Devin thinks *it's not like as special as it was back then or as noticeable*. And secondly, *back then I guess we were literally way below them, even though we're equal, it's like they thought they were the kings and that we were their servants.*

Although Devin takes a thoughtful and critical approach to our discussion, her school writing is devoid of any of the opinions she shared in our interview, stating simply, *we don't really do a lot of that kind of writing in our school.* In terms of race, *sometimes it's just like they* [teachers] *don't talk about it, because it's stored in the back of their minds. They're more worried about math, reading, ELAs. What they're going to teach us for the year. They forget about it until*

someone mentions it. Then they're like, "Oh, yeah." Devin profoundly identifies race as an afterthought in the classroom. It is not until there's an overt political tension that is difficult to ignore that teachers feel compelled to address it.

Students and teachers play it safe with political writing. As Devin and I discuss how often she experiences a critical or sociopolitical approach to school writing, she surprises me with a non-school answer. *Basically, whenever I'm at home.* Drawing on my example of the Black Lives Matter Movement, she states *at school, they don't really…they're not directing it…they're not averting it all the way to Black Lives but it's not all Whites. It's like a mixture of both. More at home – there's more topics of Black people and how they've gotten shot or something else. It's mainly on the news.* Devin recognizes that school is not her primary resource to learn, write, and discuss critical or sociopolitical issues in the world. Indeed, teachers can intentionally avoid sociopolitical writing and dialogue in the classroom. *We use our computer to read passages, like in reading*. Devin pulls up a reading passage that was recently assigned to her class on the computer. It's called, "*Dear Mr. President." It's about all these letters that kids wrote about problems that they're having... so that the president can make a choice to do it. For example,* Devin begins to read aloud from the passage on her computer. *"In 1860, 11-year-old Grace saw a picture of then presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln and didn't like the way he looked. Grace wrote Lincoln a letter, "If you let your whiskers grow, you would look so much better, for your face is thin."*

When I ask whether the class was invited to write on this topic as an extension or make any connections to today, Devin simply stated, *no*. I push further and specifically ask about opportunities to write about Donald Trump. To this, she emphatically replies *not at all. Mainly because… I don't know, but people might not be that happy about it. They may fuss around.* We

probably won't write about him till next year. Maybe a year after next. Maybe once he's out of office or something. Devin believes the current president is best discussed in school as a historical figure, as opposed to a contentious present-day reality. She considers the strong feelings and emotions that may be stirred if she and her classmates were asked to write about the current president. Given the opportunity to write an opinion piece on Donald Trump, Devin thinks it would be *very easy* to do so. *I've got too much things, it might take up four pages or so. My feelings about him are not good, so it would not be very good. I don't like the things he does in office. All 26 people in my class would be doing the same thing. Like the whole school doesn't really have ... it has negative feelings* [toward the president].

I find this passion to be an interesting parallel compared to the recent one-page opinion piece Devin recently completed. Her essay is entitled, *Why I think dogs are better than cats by Devin Smithson. Well, we had a choice and I chose the one that I felt very strongly about since I have a dog. I like dogs better because they're more loyal and nice, and like to follow you around. They don't scratch every single second.* The other topics were *like why we should have extra recess or why we have school later. We got to pick. I just felt that this one was best for me because all the others, I don't really mind…I've adapted to that stuff. But I don't really like cats.* Out of the choices presented, Devin sought the one where she had the strongest feelings.

During our final interview, I pointedly ask Devin "When you think about all of the things that we've discussed, all of our big topics, different issues, looking at race and sociopolitical issues, different things in our world, why things are set up the way they are, different systems, race, class, all these big things we've talked about – do you feel like you get to pour all of that into your school writing?" Much to my dismay Devin calmly replies, *No. Most of the time we*

don't get to do it, unless it's on historical events, like Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks. Like historical events, not like based on relevant events.

Writing topics on race or sociopolitical issues have the potential to engage and empower students. As Devin shares, she would likely have much to say about a topic she is passionate about, such as Donald Trump's presidency. Unfortunately, her opportunity to articulate and critically argue her thoughts are only stretched as far as safe, basic, and neutral topics. In Devin's experience race and politics in school writing remain tethered to history.

Ambiguity toward Critical/Sociopolitical Writing.

Devin is opinionated, critical, and questions a variety of sociopolitical issues, but when it comes to writing about critical issues and who she is in the world, she expresses ambivalence toward the need to do so. She does not recognize learning about herself as a major benefit of school writing. Thus, there is a contrast between how Devin reads the world, and how she writes the world.

Uncertainty about identity exploration. For most of our time together, Devin confidently navigates her way through conversation on school writing. She share a range of stories and experiences with great detail. She identifies the benefits she receives from school writing, mostly in terms of technical writing aspects and the need for future skill sets. However, a noticeable shift occurs when I ask Devin to discuss school writing in terms of identity. Devin believes school writing should *help you learn. From whatever subject is, let's say it's writing, and you're learning about the introduction paragraph, the body paragraphs and the ... what is it called? The conclusion. It would help you understand the parts of a passage, because before I didn't even know what the body paragraphs were. I didn't know there was an introduction paragraph and a conclusion. And I didn't know that conclusions said so much detail.*

These components of a piece of writing are top of mind when Devin considers what one learns and should learn from school writing. Learning the content organization of writing is important to her *because depending on what job you get, I've seen that the nurse sometimes writes reports. If you go down and you say you're hurt, the nurse, she would type down what you said and she would keep it in mind. She would say what happened and then in the body paragraph you could write like, first she said that something, something…then she said… and then in conclusion…School writing should also help you understand the paragraphs that you'll read once you get out in the world and you receive these passages, you know so that if it's your job to trim down the paragraphs and stuff, you can trim them down but not cut off like important details to help the reader understand what's going on.*

When I ask Devin to consider whether school writing helps her in other ways, such as learning more about her identity or her personal experiences in the world as a young Black girl, she has less to say. She confidently and quickly states, *no*. If she were to write a story about her identity *I mean it would be pretty short. My life is about the same as everyone else's. I feel fine. Don't really notice it that much.* She grapples with whether identity exploration should be a role of school writing. *I don't really know…I mean I guess so. I guess you could write more narratives about yourself, that way the teacher can understand you more. Yeah, you could, cause you could be writing and then you realize that you do something and that you're really good at typing or you have really neat handwriting.* Devin briefly ponders how writing may lead to identity exploration, and even the idea that her teacher could benefit from learning more about who Devin is as a person. In the end though, she highlights the technical skills of writing as prominent examples of what she learns through writing. I challenge her. I ask what she might learn or write about when the topic is "Who is Devin Smithson? What is her life like? What are

her struggles or challenges? What are her perspectives and opinions on life?" To this end, Devin becomes less sure. A pause, and then, *Well I don't really know what I would write, I would write…I don't know.*

In a follow up interview about a month later, I again ask Devin about her experience as a young Black girl when it comes to school writing, identity, race, and sociopolitical topics. This time, she contends that she learns about herself through writing, but she does not link writing in this way to any significant outcome or purpose. *We don't learn about ourselves through writing a lot. But after a while, you get to know yourself really well, and so there's no more surprises. You just stop learning about yourself.* While Devin struggles to identify greater connections between writing and identity exploration, through our interviews I learn that Devin has plenty of ideas and opinions about the world and her place in it as a young Black girl.

Questioning the status quo. While opportunities to learn about self, identity, politics, or race are not explicit for Devin in her school writing experience, she critically questions both the role and implication of race in our world, and reflects on her own school and life experiences in such regard. As a fourth grade, middle-class Black girl attending Preston Elementary, *I don't see any difference if we're White and Black. It's just, every day, we go to school, we learn, we have lunch, we have recess. We go back to learning. Then it's time to go. That's it. There's no difference.* Race doesn't matter *right now, but I think in the lower grades it'll be a little bit more serious. Like probably starting in high school, college. I call them lower, because it's like you're getting lower from your career at school. Because the more people are ... people are changing a bit. I mean it probably… I don't know why I think that. But most times, in the lower grades then more stuff happens. Because people I guess are more aware.*

For Devin, being one of two Black girls in her class may not make a "difference" right now, but it does not go unnoticed or unquestioned by her. *Well, it happens most of the time. After a while you get used to it. But at the beginning, it's like ... they are all White. Not like Black, not even like half and half. It's like, there's not even like five or two or three or four. There's just one. And there is one Asian kid. This one time, I was in kindergarten or pre-K. I can't remember which one. And I was the only Black girl there. And during swimming, there's like three of us. Well, two of us are girls and the other one's a boy. Then everyone else is pretty much White. Our instructors are White. We're put into different lanes. One of us is put into lane one, I'm put into lane two, and the other one is put into lane three. It's like, "What should I do?" So after a minute or two, I got used to it – just being the only one. Or just being one of the few. Because it's like, everywhere I go, Girls on the Run, I'm the only one I think. No. There's three or four. I just want to know why? Why is it like that? Why isn't it the other way around? And why does it happen so frequently? It's like not so many Black people are in the same class. Because I think in school, they spread 'em out, so that each class has a few, at least one. But sometimes it's like, "Why?" When my mom was in school, she and her brother were the only Black kids in the whole entire school. I mean, that's like a popular situation to be in. So why does it have to happen?* It is interesting that in both school and recreational activities Devin often feels like she is the only Black person. Even when she's not, she knows exactly how many other Black children are in the class, in the activity, or in the club. In her experience, there are often less handful of children like her.

I commend Devin for posing such thoughtful questions. I ask her if she would be interested in researching and writing about these issues. I wonder what might be other critical issues that she cares deeply about. She excitedly continues. *Well, yes. Even in your*

neighborhood, it's like you only get three neighbors that have Black families. And so, it's like, why don't we mix it up a bit? And back in the day, why was it that White people avoided us? I mean, is that still like that? As Devin questions the racial makeup of her neighborhood community, I mention the phenomenon of White flight and segregated neighborhoods that continue to exist today. She is interested in this social justice issue and continues to voice her perspective and concerns. *I mean, it's not just White people and Black people. I mean why not have a mix of like Asian or…? Because I think the people in that black house* [a nearby house], *I think they're Asians. Or China. I don't know. But it's like, why can't there be more of different kinds of people?* Devin would like to see greater diversity in her neighborhood *because then we'd learn more about it. Then, I think since some places still have laws that say Black people and White people and other people can't be around each other, like why?*

When I ask her if children in general should be able to discuss such issues in school writing, she replies ambiguously. *I think so. Some of them. Maybe not all of them. But maybe some of their questions can be answered. Because then their curiosity usually wins people over…but sometimes, we should wait for topics until we're older and more mature. So* [students] *will search it up on their own if they actually have the question. Which, I guess, if you're more aware of the situation, you can help stop it.* Devin first describes writing for social justice as a way to discover the answers to one's questions and make a difference in the world, but then also as *some bad ways,* if *people use* [writing] *like in a mean way. Like, different people have tales about us. Because my mom said that some White people thought that all Black people had tails.*

Devin alludes to conversations about race with her parents, further shaping her critical view and understanding of the world. She is careful to make the distinction between home and school spaces. She does not view school as a place where she is free to write, discuss, and learn

about race and other sociopolitical issues. *Like racism – if you have thoughts about that, then I would be a little bit more restricted* [in school]. *Sometimes I write stuff in my head about what's going on and how Black people keep getting shot, frequently actually*. *Everyday*.
But if you did it at home, then I guess that's cool. But at school I think it's not a possibility 'til you get to the lower grades, like *high school, college*. Devin highlights a powerful social justice issue, but that she only writes it *in my head*. I question students' educative experiences when they feel restricted to explore, question, and challenge the status quo. Devin believes if she didn't have the parents she has, *I wouldn't know what I basically know at the moment. Like I might not listen to the news as much. So that if I do one day come across a time when I wanna write about* [sociopolitical issues] *there might not be anything for me to write*. Thus, Devin credits her parents as the teachers who help her *learn more about the outside world*.

Approaching immigration injustice. Devin's sense of curiosity and justice is further evidenced by her opinion of immigration into the United States and the refugee experience. *Last year we had immigration and I can't find the word. I'm forgetting my words. But we had learned about people ... refugees, refugees is the word I was looking for. Refugees and how they were just fleeing from their own country and then they became homeless. And they had no homes or any food sometimes they would have a little food but that wouldn't last long.* Devin raises this as a critical, social justice issue *because they lost their homes and sometimes they would lose the battle. And so they went through all of that just for nothing. We read books about it* [immigration in the U.S.]. *I don't like this year's president because refugees are looking for a home. They come here and sometimes their babies get taken away from them and they're not allowed to come.*

Devin references the 2018 Trump administration policy of forced separation between parents and children at the U.S. and Mexico border and the subsequent imprisonment of children in deportation camps. She clarifies that she *watched on the news* and talked about it with her parents, as opposed to discussing the policy and implications in school. *I think that's unfair 'cause they're fleeing from their own country and their leaving behind all their stuff basically. Sometimes they couldn't even get out in the traffic, so they would have to walk. They were depressing actually. I can't imagine being taken away from my mom or dad or brother because I've known them for all nine years. And I live with them. They take care of me. To be separated from them…*

Given Devin's knowledge and concern for the refugee experience, I ask her if she would like to write about it. *Sometimes yes and sometimes no*. *Sometimes yes because that way I can send it to others so that they understand why I'm so upset about this. Sometimes no, because otherwise some people may like the president and strongly act about that and don't like it. But I think that if I wrote about it and I sent it to the wrong person, then that could be a problem*. Additionally, Devin shares that she has done some writing on the topic in school but is unable to find or recall the piece from last year.

Overall, Devin agrees that writing is a way to change the world. *I say that mainly 'cause, like if you don't write then you speak. And speaking's good, but sometimes you need to plan out what you're gonna say, so maybe you write it down*. In my time spent with Devin she speaks with enthusiasm and conviction concerning several sociopolitical issues, but when I ask whether she and her peers would or should be writing about these issues in school given a choice, she replies *probably, sometimes,* and *I don't know.* Devin reaffirms a pattern of ambiguity and uncertainty

toward writing her world. Her critical verbal expression toward sociopolitical issues are contrasted by a mild desire to actually write about them in school.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

In Chapter 4, I presented the narrative constellations of Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin. The narratives represent a collection of their personal experiences and beliefs with school writing. The stories they told were ones that bubbled to the surface of memory, heart, and mind and interspersed our many conversations over five to six months. In looking across all the narratives, I asked, "What is it that binds the individual narrative constellations to each other?" To answer this, I applied a narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). I read and reread each story and noted connections, patterns, and reiterations across all four texts in order to determine how the constellations interconnected to form a grander picture. I also returned to my original research questions. From here, I was able to determine four themes that answer my questions: 1) technical writing skills matter to students, 2) school writing is highly structured by way of standards-based genres and assigned topics, 3) teachers avoid critical/sociopolitical writing and discussion in the classroom, and 4) Black identities endure an active process of invisibility and silencing in school. Below I discuss each of these themes in depth and highlight student evidence from the narratives.

Technical Writing Skills Matter to Students

Not surprisingly, all students in the research study initiated conversation surrounding the technical aspects of writing as an integral part of their writing experience. This theme is supported by Cutler and Graham (2008), Ivanic (2004), and Lambirth's (2016) research that shows students often embrace a skills-based discourse as they develop an understanding of school writing. Thus, whether it was spelling, grammar, handwriting, or punctuation, students assessed themselves by these measures. Although students also discussed the content and

structure of their writing, they were highly cognizant of their mastery or non-mastery of technical skills in their school writing. Student naturally connected these skills to their writing experiences. They cited their personal or school rules concerning technical writing and discussed the implications of not being able to perform these correctly in their writing. Sub-themes that emerged under the scope of technical writing skills include: the struggle for mastery, the importance of technical skills for college and career, and learning the structure of writing.

Student Evidence: Technical writing skills matter to students.	
[On a scale of one to ten], *I'd put myself as a seven because I make a lot of spelling mistakes. Like the content of my writing is really good. But I'll miss minor things and my spelling sometimes is just really, really crazy. I like to have that right. A lot of wrong spelling would kind of mess with your content because other readers wouldn't be able to get what you were saying. – Taylor*	*Our teacher doesn't count off on spelling because she's dyslexic. I feel relieved because I don't have to go back in the dictionary or raise my hand and ask a lot of questions. I just write it how it's in my head*. [On the computer] *she will count off for spelling because of the fact that there's this thing where if you press on it, it says, "Tell me what to do." And you type in "spelling" and "grammar" and click on it, it'll show you how to fix it. If we're writing it, she won't count off, but if we are typing it, she'll count off. But grammar, she will count off. We do a lot of grammar checks. – Asher*
Fourth grade is kind of like a review grade, so we did a lot of stuff that we did in third grade, but a little more advanced. We did run on sentences. We did grammar, punctuation, all that stuff. It was pretty easy, because most of us already learned it. Surprisingly, not many people were good at grammar and punctuation. – Zoe	*When I write, I don't really like my handwriting. I don't really like writing because it's not my favorite subject and I don't like writing down things. My handwriting is not that neat, but that doesn't stop me from writing. It hurts my hand. My worst worry is always that I'm putting the wrong punctuation down. Now that I'm in fourth grade, it kind of matters now. Unlike in kindergarten I could get away with it. Just like I could spell "funny" wrong and get away with it. Now I have to spell it the right way. – Devin*

The Struggle for Mastery

When I asked students to share their ideas, beliefs, stories, memories, or experiences with school writing, technical skills of writing often made their way into the conversation. Along with it came students' thoughts about their own mastery of skills such as spelling, grammar, handwriting, or punctuation. These basic writing skills mirror many of the same things students first learn in school about writing.

Spelling was one area that Taylor, Asher, and Zoe discussed as a challenge. Indeed, although Taylor is a talented and creative writer, she rated herself a 7 out of 10 as because of her concerns with spelling. Taylor recognized the content of one's writing as more important than the spelling itself, but continued to highlight the importance of accurate spelling as a means to properly communicate the content. While Taylor saw her spelling as a hinderance to her writing talent, Asher expressed a sense of relief that his teacher did not count off for his spelling mistakes on handwritten assignments.

Although spelling did not resonate with Asher in the same way it did with Taylor, it was evident that spelling was important to him. During the book-making session, Asher paused to ask me for spelling help as he wrote a favorite quote: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." I found this to be ironic in that Asher valued imagination and creativity in writing, but also privileged the concrete knowledge of knowing how to spell the quote correctly. For Zoe, spelling was the only thing that brought down her score of an essay she was deeply proud of. *I got like a 98 on it. I just missed two spelling errors. One of them was bicycle, which is like my mortal enemy as a word. At the spelling bee this year I am not going to lose on bicycle*!
While spelling mattered greatly for Asher and Zoe, they did not allow it to detract from their identity or ability as a writer as Taylor did.

For Zoe, grammar resonated with her as an ongoing and difficult-to-master skill. For instance, she pondered in amusement at her and her peers' inability to master the same grammar skills they were repeatedly taught over the elementary years. Zoe's assessment of the disconnect between the teaching and learning of grammar aligns well with research that states that teaching grammar in isolation is not effective (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Harris, 1962). Notably, Zoe marked a shift in her fifth-grade school year in that there seemed to be more writing, and less grammar instruction. Asher, too, highlighted his grammar instruction as part of a 20-minute weekly rotation of "Grammar Checks." Zoe and Asher's isolated grammar instruction and practice may allude to the ongoing struggle of mastery. It is important to consider how grammar will continue to be a focus for students as they journey into middle and high school. Because grammar is a subset of the English Language Arts state standards, teachers are required to help students master a variety of grammar skills. While not all teachers provide grammar instruction in the same way, an unproductive cycle of teaching grammar in isolation, and reteaching unmastered grammar skills in isolation is a well-researched trend (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Harris, 1962; Zuidema, 2012).

Lastly, handwriting and punctuation were skills that Devin often discussed as areas of struggle. First, Devin's identity as a writer and her views on school writing were closely linked to the neatness of her handwriting. When I asked Devin to rate on a scale of 1-10 whether she thought her third-grade teacher did a good job of teaching her how to write, she stated, *I give her an eight because she helped us write really, really long paragraphs. I would have given her a ten but my handwriting's still not that neat.* Rather than discussing broader concepts of writing, Devin first points to technical skills such as length of paragraphs and handwriting. Overall, she summarized neat handwriting and knowing how to spell as the hallmarks of good writers. Again,

handwriting and the formation of lines, curves, and letters is one of the first steps in formal writing for young writers (Clay, 1975; Dyson, 1995). It is interesting then to see Devin return to this skill set as a site of struggle and position it as a key attribute of a "good" writer.

Secondly, Devin stated, *my worst worry is always that I'm putting the wrong punctuation down*. Despite positive and holistic comments from her teacher about her writing, Devin was hyper focused on her punctuation and capitalization errors. So much so, that it became the biggest take-away from her teacher's feedback. As a fourth-grade student continuing her development as a writer, Devin wanted to avoid such mistakes. Her fixation on the technical errors could also indicate a level of anxiety surrounding writing rules and guidelines (Rose, 1994). Devin's desire to ensure an error-free, cohesive piece of writing that readers will understand was somewhat evidenced by her decision to take on the role as editor during a group writing assignment. She wanted to ensure everyone's writing made sense, flowed, and was correct.

Whether it was spelling, handwriting, grammar, or punctuation, the collective narratives illustrate a pattern in beliefs. All four students viewed mastering technical skills as a tension. Getting the technical skills right school mattered greatly to students and came with a variety of implications such as positive or negative views of self as writer, the need to relearn skills not mastered, and the ability to be successful in future careers. For Black students, these

Learning the Structure of Writing

Although technical writing skills resonated as a theme across all students' beliefs and experiences with school writing, they also viewed broader English Language Arts skills such as crafting a 5-paragraph essay, identifying main ideas and text structures, and creating an introduction as key skills relevant to their writing experiences.

Asher's school writing experiences were largely made up of structured writing assignments such as Document-Based Questions essays. Therefore, learning the formula of introduction/thesis, three reasons with supporting evidence, and a conclusion became an important skill set for Asher to master. Similarly, Devin shared excitement for learning about the paragraph structure of an essay. *I didn't know there was an introduction paragraph and a conclusion. And I didn't know that conclusions said so much detail.* Students' experience with both content-related and technical writing skills shaped their perception of how school writing may affect their future. They envisioned their adult lives and the roles writing will play in their college and career settings.

Importance of Writing for College and Career

Adequately preparing students to write for college and career is one of the goals of the Common Core State Standards (Coleman, & Pimental, 2012; Pearson, & Hiebert, 2013). Zoe, Taylor, and Asher all made points about the importance of writing for college at least once. Zoe stated that she needed to practice typing because *if I'm in high school or college, I would probably need to write a lot of essays, like every single day.* While Zoe emphasized a more technical aspect of school writing, Asher made observations about college education, income levels, and job opportunity. However, none of the students circled back to their beliefs about school writing and college as they did with other topics. Higher education was not seen as a future possibility based on their current skill set, but rather an attainable reality that was presumed to occur no matter what. In other words, future college success did not hinge on their current school writing ability. This assumption underscored an unspoken academic privilege of the upper middle-class status of the participants.

School writing as it related to career paths was a more prominent sub-theme than college. Taylor and Devin explicitly named connections between their writing skills and experiences and their future careers. Taylor described the importance of being able to craft an opinion or argument in a piece of writing because one day she may need to persuade her boss to allow her to take on an assignment. She also mentioned the need to be *academically skilled to be a doctor*. Devin shared that when she went to a doctor's office or veterinarian, she closely observed the professionals writing notes. She felt that the ability to write a body paragraph and spell correctly was critical to communicating necessary information in these roles. *I think it's important because otherwise once you get out of school and you're sitting there in your business, when you've got a job and everything and they want you to write something down. You're like, "What?" It's like you don't know how to spell correctly and you need to work on your handwriting.* Both girls believed the writing skills they applied in school now, will serve a bigger purpose in their future. The students seemed to think beyond college to their lives as professionals.

School Writing is Highly Structured

As students shared multiple stories about their writing experiences and their writing pieces, it became clear that much of their writing was structured by genre, teacher choice, and district curriculum standards. Teachers made decisions about the genre of writing students would practice, the length of time given to assignments, whether a writing piece would be completed or left unfinished, how much time (if any) would be dedicated to free writing, the topics to write about, the choices available to students within the assigned topics, and the research materials available for research reports. These parameters left students with little-to-no choice in their school writing.

Student Evidence: School writing is highly structured.	
Like I'll go to school and we'll learn about non-fiction and opinion and we'll write non-fiction and opinion pieces. Then I'll think back to my 4th, 3rd, 2nd and 1st grade years and I'll think, "Wow, I think we've done non-fiction and opinion writing every single one of those years." And I think, "Are there any other pieces that you can do?" I would like to tell my teacher that sometimes I really, really don't want to do the topic that we're supposed to do, and maybe there would be a different topic that we could do within the same standard. *I mean I get that there should be genres, but I think it should be you're happy in the genre. You can write about what you want to write about. – Taylor*	*We have DBQs. It stems from document-based questions. It's just one question,* but *it's a whole packet on it. She went through every chapter with us as the whole class and we wrote down the main point of each document and cite our favorite evidence.* *We did* [essays and reports] *about history in Ms. Tinsley's class. We always did history. We always have to do R.A.C.E. and then she would give us a sheet. You read it, highlight, and then write about it. – Asher*
We only did Author's Choice once, and the others were like narratives, informatives, opinions. Every once in a while, we should have something super fun. I do not like informative and opinion writing. With informative, you've got to do like 30 minutes of research for like two sentences. And opinion, it's hard to convince or persuade people if you're not even talking to anyone. – Zoe	*You don't have as much freedom about what you're gonna write about. I mean you still have a choice, but just like already choices for you. At school you have this certain topic and the certain* [genre] *and it's like the teacher says make an opinion piece about one of these four choices. You pick the one you feel strongest about and then you write a piece. But it's not like having your own decision –like saying, "I'm gonna do a fantasy or a non-fiction or about jobs." It's more like they decide. They give you your options or sometimes they just give you one topic. It's not fair. We need more decisions. In this opinion piece, what if everyone wants to write a fantasy piece? – Devin*

Highly structured writing experiences resulted in several sub themes: An emphasis on nonfiction and opinion/argumentative writing, surface level writing, a sense of resignation, and little time for free-writing.

Emphasis on Nonfiction and Opinion/Argumentative Writing

Throughout the entire first semester of school, all students were routinely made to write nonfiction and opinion/argumentative pieces. The focus on these genres aligns with the Common Core State Standards (2010). The 2008 national shift in standards resulted in a new emphasis on these two types of writing. While narrative writing may be more prominent in the second semester of school, it is still a guided structure. Free writing, as a form of open, creative writing in any form was not as common in the students' writing experiences. Indeed, the majority of Asher's writing experiences were heavily rooted in non-fiction texts, document-based questions, and the 5-paragraph essay structure that required the citation of evidence and specific formula. Although he was required to write routinely in these ways, he enjoyed the social studies topics. Additionally, he felt like it prepared him for middle school. However, Asher made it clear that his personal preference for writing does not lie in non-fiction and opinion writing. Overall, all students expressed frustrations with the narrow writing forms they were continually asked to produce.

Surface-level Writing

One issue that arose when students were not given choice in the writing process is surface-level writing. Surface-level writing may not require deep and complex analysis, or critical thinking about the topic. It may also be content-driven as opposed to exploring new ideas and ways of thinking. When teachers assign certain topics in school writing, they risk imposing a lack of criticality. For instance, at the beginning of a new opinion piece, Taylor was excited to write about a topic she had planned for herself: *How humans destroy ourselves, society, and the world around us*. Instead, the teacher required the class to write on a topic in connection with the current social studies unit: *The most impactful thing from World War I*. Begrudgingly, Taylor

relinquished her topic and resigned to write about trenches in World War I. The was no discussion between Taylor and the teacher to see how Taylor's topic might fit within the scope of the overarching assigned topic despite the fact that human's destruction of the earth and society could easily yield a compelling argument about the destruction in World War I.

Similarly, Devin shared how she was given three or four choices for an opinion piece. The topics surrounded themes of recess and school hours. From her choices Taylor selected the topic "Why dogs are better than cats" because she had *adapted* to previous topics and was seemingly indifferent toward them. Although Devin produced a well-written one-page essay on the topic, she also stated that if she were asked to write an opinion piece about something she felt strongly about, such as Donald Trump, she could easily produce several pages. Students were provided with writing topics that sometimes watered-down opportunities for critical thinking through writing. Given Taylor's poem, *The Land of the Unconditional* (see pg. 124), I can only imagine what she may have written about the human paradox of contributing to our own demise. Secondly, there was something bothersome in witnessing Devin's remarkable ability to discuss important, critical issues knowing that she was resigned to argue about topics like cats versus dogs. In this vein, the students seemed to apply critical thinking in writing at a level below what they are capable of.

Little Time for Free-writing

Because most of the students' school writing time was spent working within two to three genres, there was little time for free-writing. Opportunities to create stories of their choice were condensed into small pockets of time. Asher's Weekly Five ELA center rotations allowed him approximately 20 minutes a week to write on easy, *fun* topics his teachers assigned. However, to allow a degree of choice, the teacher compromised with students. Asher stated that if he *can*

finish [the assigned writing prompt] *in like five minutes then I'll have like 15 whole minutes to write whatever I want.*

Fifteen minutes once a week is not a lot of time. Devin stated that she was given 10-15 minutes before dismissal each day. Yet, this time was not mandated writing time. Students could choose to do free writing, draw, read, or sit quietly. Devin preferred to use this time to read rather than write. She felt the time at the end of the day was not enough to develop a substantial piece of writing. While Asher and Devin received small pockets of time to free write, Zoe's teacher allowed what she called *Author's Choice.* This was a focused time for students to write creatively in any genre they chose. Zoe enjoyed this time because she was free to explore deep within her imagination. She and her classmates were allowed to do Author's Choice one to two times per week. However, Zoe asserted that there had only been one time where students were afforded time to fully develop their stories in the way they were expected to with opinion and non-fiction writing. When Zoe was given time in school to complete the writing process with her Author's Choice story, she composed a 5-page science-fiction story about time travel.

From the narratives, it is clear that students were not provided time in school to write in ways they desired. Creative writing pieces such as fantasy, poetry, action-adventure, and suspense stories were positioned as secondary and less important than other forms of writing. This decision is problematic for students like Taylor and Zoe who repeatedly expressed a desire to explore their own passions and interests as young writers. Furthermore, the prioritizing of nonfiction and argumentative writing over creative-based writing is a contradiction in academic goals. Minimizing free writing in favor of pre-selected, non-fiction and argumentative writing may help meet the goals of Common Core standards, but this premise ignores the importance of children writing and thinking about topics that are important to them. Thus, opportunities for

critical thinking, problem solving, and imagination are diminished when creative writing is stripped from the writing curriculum (Nathan, 2015).

A Sense of Resignation

Each student acknowledged that school writing served a purpose. They also recognized that as a student, they were expected to complete the assignments from their teachers. Thus, while Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin preferred more choice in their school writing, there was a sense of resignation that went along with school expectations. Taylor and Zoe expressed forms of coping strategies to help them accept the constant structure and assigned writing experiences. For instance, Taylor prepped herself to be able to approach writing assignments she was not interested in or inspired by: *I think, "Well, what are some ways that I can make this fun for myself?" "How am I going to kind of put this to where I will enjoy writing about something that I don't want to write about?" Even if I can't, I'll just keep going and make it to where the writing makes sense even though it's not something that I want to do.* Taylor's metacognitive self-talk was a strategy to combat her structured writing experiences.

Zoe pushed back on the structured writing experiences as well, but like Taylor, only in her mind. She argued that it was *kind of hard to write about it if you're not writing for anyone.* This tension was accompanied by a sense of resignation because Zoe completed her assignments and did not verbalize her contention to the teacher. Zoe's mental strategy involved a mental, personal challenge. She just *does it* [assigned opinion writing] *because she likes to argue and win a point.* In this way, Zoe challenged herself to simply win the argument, even if she recognized the lack of authenticity and social purpose for writing. Despite these parameters, all students spoke positively and proudly about many of their school writing pieces. They accepted the fact that they simply do not have choice and freedom in the writing process at school.

Teachers Avoid Critical/Sociopolitical Writing

Ivanic (2004) posits that students who embrace a sociopolitical discourse in writing view writing as a way to challenge the status quo: to speak up and speak out. While students occasionally alluded to this discourse, none of them fully embraced it or participated in it. This lack of agency in social justice writing may be attributed to the students' beliefs that teachers avoided sociopolitical issues and current events in the classroom. The instructional decision to distance students and themselves as teachers from issues that surround race, politics, social justice, or other critical topics, also weakens opportunities for students to write, discuss, and think through real-world, social justice issues, and build a sense of agency in the world. The lack of sociopolitical writing was evidenced in student writing as they rarely challenged, questioned, or explored current societal issues in writing. The lack of criticality is not attributed to students' not knowing how to think deeply and analytically, because each child spoke with me for hours concerning race, class, identity, and school and neighborhood context. Knowledge, awareness, and a sense of wonder were present within each child. They were poised to do more, think more, and write deeper. Unfortunately, writing opportunities congruent to the students' depth and criticality were limited in school.

Student Evidence: Teachers avoid critical/sociopolitical writing.	
We're not allowed to go into politics at school. So, we wouldn't write about any political things that were happening. When I'm writing at school, I push those out of my mind. We were told, "No. We're not allowed to talk about politics at school. That could make another person upset in some way about how they voted." – Taylor	*Well, they normally don't want us writing about that in school because some people like the president and some people don't. It's kind of offensive if one child writes all these bad things about the president. Then the person whose parents like the president and they like the president, then they feel offended. So we normally don't write about politics. I don't like to write about Trump because I may say something that I'll regret. If we do,* [write about politics] *we write about a politic in the past. – Asher*

Since everyone in the school is basically completely different, we don't really talk about politics and like immigrants and stuff. It's kind of like just leave it alone. There's not any examples. Politics is something we just don't really talk about. It's not like banned, but it's just something that you just kind of don't talk about at school. – Zoe	*I don't know, but people might not be that happy about it. They may fuss around.* We *probably won't write about him* [Donald Trump] *till next year. Maybe a year after next. Maybe once he's out of office or something.* *At school, they're not directing it…they're not averting it all the way to Black Lives* [Matter] *but it's not all Whites. It's like a mixture of both.* – Devin

The overarching theme that teachers avoided critical/sociopolitical writing and discussion in the classroom can be divided into three sub-themes. Students believed that such topics were avoided because of the need to maintain a positive school climate, the need for teachers to maintain control of the class, and the belief that sociopolitical writing was reserved for the past or the future, but not the present.

Maintaining a Positive School Climate

School should be a space where every face is welcomed and valued. This message can be conveyed to children in different ways. In the case of Zoe and Devin, a message of inclusiveness seemed to envelope their schools' culture, but in a way in which students came to understand that critical and sociopolitical issues should be avoided because everyone is equal.

It is worth noting that Devin's school, Preston Elementary, can be considered predominantly-White. Zoe's school, Orchard Mill, is slightly more diverse but also had over four times the number of White students in comparison to the number of Black students. Zoe and Devin both linked their teachers' avoidance of critical and sociopolitical issues to an effort to maintain a positive school climate. This perspective is rooted in Zoe's description of her school as *passive* and *peaceful.* Zoe intentionally chose the word *passive*, because she believed her school *did not*

want to anger anyone by bringing up race or sociopolitical issues. *My school is like everyone is just the same.*

Devin perceived that her school did not fully support the Black Lives Matter Movement but instead embraced a more equal stance that both Black and White lives matter to show equality. Although Devin commented on the disparity between the Black and White population of students at her school, and Zoe commented on the diversity she saw at her school, both girls emphasized notions of equality and sameness at their schools. This notion of sameness is problematic because it serves to keep Black identities invisible and irrelevant in school writing topics. The idea of sameness and equality here is similar to a colorblind ideology that ignores the historical, social, economic, and political issues in the United States that are present for Black children and distinctly different from children of other races and ethnicities.

Teacher Control

From the students' narratives it was clear that critical or sociopolitical issues occasionally entered the classroom space; when they did, teachers approached them cautiously and with parameters. Students expressed that the critical topics were skimmed over, or sometimes simply not allowed. They perceived teachers' responses as normal and acceptable because they believed teachers were attempting to keep the peace in the classroom and avoid situations where students might be offended. Taylor described her fifth-grade teacher's approach to sociopolitical writing and discussion as *"I want to hear what you guys want to say, but I do not want you to get overly into it."* In this way the elimination of emotions also serves as the elimination of individual voice.

The perceptions of the teachers seemed to transfer to the students. There was a sense among students that sometimes, it was best that critical and sociopolitical issues were not

brought into the classroom space, or even into their writing. For instance, Taylor stated that like her teacher, *I'd also make sure that* [writing and discussion] *was controlled. I would not let it be to where the class was separated into two parts debating every single day.* Asher declared that if he were the teacher, *I wouldn't let them write about politics because it could start more chaos in the classroom. I will let* [students] *write about past politics like Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln. I'll let them learn about those presidents but not the one in the office right now.* Thus, students seem to parallel their teachers' views on these issues.

An important point to note here are the races and genders of the students' teachers in their elementary journey. Table 5.1 illustrates that while a few students have had experiences with teachers of color, the majority of their schooling has been facilitated by White women. Because teachers bring their cultural backgrounds and perspectives on the world into the classroom, and into their teaching examining the racial demographics between student and teacher is valuable and can offer additional context to the students' experiences with school writing. Asher stated that if he had Black teachers, they may teach critical Black history topics differently. While Devin, the only student in the study to have a male teacher, noted that although she had Black teachers in the past, she received the same style of teaching with no differences. Throughout the study, the majority of stories and experiences with writing were rooted in their upper-elementary classroom experiences, where the majority of their teachers were White women.

Table 5.1: Race and Gender of Students' Teachers from Kindergarten to Fifth Grade

Race and Gender of Students' Teachers from Kindergarten to Fifth Grade						
Student	K	1st Grade	2nd Grade	3rd Grade	4th Grade	5th Grade
Taylor	WF	BF	BF	WF	WF	WF
Asher	WF	WF	WF	WF	WF	WF
Zoe	WF	WF	WF	WF	WF	WF
Devin	BF	WF	BF	WF	WM	------

Students' experience with critical issues was limited and narrow in context. When students did bring up critical or sociopolitical issues, it was often in relation to social studies content. For example, civil rights, slavery, child labor laws, and immigration were some of the topics that students cited when I asked them about critical issues they were writing, reading, and discussing in class. However, when I inquired further to see if they were learning about current connections to today, I found their learning remained content driven and surface-level. For instance, in learning about immigration as part of the fifth-grade social studies curriculum, Zoe and Asher both expressed that there was rarely any connection and relevance acknowledged to current political realities and U.S. policies. While Devin referenced her sadness and incredulity at the U.S. practice of separating migrant children from their families at the U.S. and Mexico border, she was clear that she learned and discussed this information with her parents at home, and not at school. Zoe expressed an appreciation for her teacher moving on and effectively ending a potential discussion on immigration. *We talked about it for like five minutes one time, because some kid brought it up. My teacher was able to keep it like not breaking out into a big argument over who's better and what issues ... She kind of cut it off early. It was kind of useful.*

It is important to recognize that teachers have a long list of standards to unpack, and much content to teach within the school year. However, I believe it is a disservice to teach an entire unit on immigration into the United States during the 19 and 20th centuries and ignore the humanitarian crises that exist with immigration today. A silent position on the plight of Syrian refugees or children from Central America being kept in cages strips students of the opportunity to build empathy, examine racism and nationalism within policies, and question the whys behind these issues. Students are then less likely to explore their feelings about these issues and take a stance in writing. Thus, they remained largely uninformed at school about global issues in order

to keep the peace in the classroom. Keeping the peace may protect feelings and keep students comfortable (DiAngelo, 2018). It might prevent arguments and disagreements. However, keeping the peace serves as a safety net that controls critical conversations and can dissuade students from participating and shaping the larger discourse.

Sociopolitical Writing is Reserved for the Past or Future – Not the Present

Because teachers avoided critical/sociopolitical writing, students were uncertain of its place in the classroom. Asher positioned this type of writing as best situated within a historical context, affirming his teacher's sentiments on the importance of history. *My teacher says, "I think we should talk about history because if we don't know the solutions… like let's say another World War happens, for example, then we have this solution.* In comparison, Devin, Zoe, and Taylor positioned sociopolitical writing as a future aspiration. Devin believed, *Sometimes, we should wait for topics until we're older and more mature.* Zoe stated that her *teacher mentioned doing it like the third or fourth quarter of the year, but she said she didn't decide if we should or not. She said we might do it in middle school. I think I agree with her. When I grow up I want to do some writing like that*. Lastly, Taylor stated, *I feel like we really haven't done any of the political topics this year, but as we get older, they'll let us do more and more with it, because we're getting older and we understand it more as we get older.* It is troubling that students perceive sociopolitical writing as either reserved for historical discussions, or for a time when they are older. There is much students can learn about themselves and the world from writing in the present and addressing current issues.

It was clear that students had not done much sociopolitical writing. They narrowly perceived it as a form of negative writing that may offend others, or a far-removed way to discuss issues in the world. Therefore, some students were unsure if sociopolitical writing was

something they wanted to participate in further. Devin expressed hesitation and ambiguity toward sociopolitical writing in the classroom, stating, *sometimes yes and sometimes no*. *Sometimes yes because that way I can send it to others so that they understand why I'm so upset about this. Sometimes no, because otherwise some people may like the president and strongly act about that and don't like it. I think that if I wrote about it and I sent it to the wrong person, then that could be a problem.*

While Taylor expressed a desire *to see the different things that were said* [among classmates] *and what I produced out* in sociopolitical writing, collectively the students did not fully understand sociopolitical writing as a way to embrace a sense of agency and empowerment in the writing classroom and in the real world. A parallel to the students' limited understanding of sociopolitical writing is that every student agreed that writing had the power to effect change in the world. Furthermore, every student had a wealth of ideas and opinions on critical and sociopolitical topics. Devin and Taylor alluded to the learning and change that could come from sociopolitical writing. This gap in learning reaffirms research in which critical literacy and social justice writing projects are broached with young elementary students (Dyson, 1992; Kuby,2013; Flint, & Tropp Laman; 2012; Vasquez, 2001a; 2001b). However, these opportunities were rarely fostered by the students' teachers due to the past or present positioning of sociopolitical writing.

From the students' experiences, it is clear that teachers are not facilitating sociopolitical writing. This decision creates a trickle-down effect in which students are unable to fully recognize their voice in writing as a tool to speak up and speak out. They began to adopt their teachers' views that perhaps sociopolitical writing is too tension-filled or is better reserved for the past of the future. In discussing their writing over the years, collectively the students could only recall four pieces of writing rooted in current, social justice, or critical issues concerning the

community and world today: Taylor's poem *The Land of the Unconditional*, Taylor's magazine on girl power, Devin's persuasive writing on helping the homeless, and Asher's lyric analysis of "We are the World." Sociopolitical writing taught explicitly in the curriculum affords a pathway to agency and empowerment. For Black students in particular, ignoring injustices and inequities among the Black community leads to an invisibility of Black identity. This concept is explored further in the next theme.

The Enduring Invisibility and Silencing of Black Identities

The discussion of race in many spaces is considered off-limits or taboo (Schofield, 1986). This is especially so in school (Ladson-billings, 1998; Tatum, 1997). The idea that race is controversial is one embraced by teachers in general and the students in study. The phenomenon is not uncommon (Copenhaver-Johnson, J, 2006; DiAngelo, 2018; Pollock, Deckman, Mira, & Shalaby, 2010). Rooting the Black race in issues of social justice, identity, and sociopolitical issues is not problematic in and of itself. While it may be an uncomfortable space for some students or teachers to explore, the problem comes not in the acknowledgement of such issues, but in the constant dismissal of the Black identity in school and within the curriculum (Au, Brown, & Calderón 2016). As bright, young Black girls and boys, I found the ways in which Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin collectively discussed their experiences with race and writing in school disheartening. Their beliefs led me to identify a theme that Black identity in school undergoes a process of invisibility and silencing because students viewed their race and Blackness as offensive to bring up in school, only historical, or simply unnecessary to discuss in school. Below I discuss each of these sub-themes and how they contribute to enduring processes of invisibility or silencing.

Student Evidence: The enduring invisibility and silencing of Black identities	
There were different [topics on race] *that surrounded the Civil War and things like that. The era where there was slavery. So around the eighteen hundreds-ish.* *We talked about George Washington Carver. We talked about some of the problems that he faced. Like with coming out of slavery and not being accepted.* [The teacher] *asked us a question about how he was so smart and he got into this great school, but they said that he couldn't get into the school because of his color. So she'll ask us a critical question or something like that and we'll write down in our journals and then talk about it after the lecture is finished. – Taylor*	*We talk about how Martin Luther King Jr fought for freedom and did amazing things. Rosa Parks fought for freedom.* *I comment if* [the discussion] *gets out-of-hand, but normally we don't comment on* [the *Our Friend Martin* video] *because since it was such a tragedy, and a bad thing, that all of the kids just feel that, "Oh, they* [African Americans] *went through a lot." The kids of other races are like, "Oh, they've been through a lot. It's best we just don't comment in any way."* *We would probably talk about* [race] *if something happened to a specific race besides slavery. – Asher*
[Race] *is kind of one of the things that like you'll get in trouble for talking about, because the teachers are kind of cautious about it, because, yeah, everyone's equal. The teachers, they don't want anyone having bad ... not bad opinions, but thinking stuff they shouldn't have and talking about it. There's no real reason for anyone to talk about it at school. Because no one really talks about politics or anything, unless there's something super big going on. – Zoe*	*Most teachers try to avoid it* [race]. *Sometimes if a kid says something about it then they'll be like, "You go to time out." They'll go on timeout because ... and then I see the look on my teacher's face. It's like she really means it. Sometimes the teacher just doesn't like it* [talking about race] *because sometimes it might hurt someone's feelings the way they talk about it.* *Sometimes it's just like they* [teachers] *don't talk about it, because it's stored in the back of their minds. They're more worried about math, reading, ELAs. What they're going to teach us for the year. They forget about it until someone mentions it. Then they're like, "Oh, yeah." – Devin*

Race Is Positioned as an Offensive Topic

For Zoe, Asher, and Devin, race was a topic that should not be brought up in school because it could potentially offend other students in the class. In fact, Zoe and Devin pointedly shared that talking about race could get students in trouble. Students embraced the idea that

everyone is equal, so they did not want to call attention to race within the school or writing space. Students seem to embrace the idea that race equates to something negative and inappropriate, as highlighted by the use of the words *trouble*, *time-out*, *offensive*, and *bad*. In contrast, when I asked students to tell me about the racial breakdown in their school, they astutely described the racial and ethnic diversities present at their school, as well as an estimate of how many Black students were in their classrooms or school. They did not appear to exhibit tension, fear, or distress. Perhaps this was due to my position as a woman of color and the students may have felt more comfortable discussing race with me. Either way, it was clear that students noticed the different races at their school.

Ironically, however, when I asked students how race came up in school writing, race became something to steer clear of due it its offensive nature. In particular, Asher noted his preference for his classmates' silence concerning the inequalities and injustices Black people faced during the Civil Rights Movement. *The kids of other races are like, "Oh, they've* [African-Americans] *have been through a lot. It's best we just don't comment in any way." Because then they think* [we] *may take it in the wrong way, which would lead to chaos. They don't want that to happen because they already know it was a bad thing for slavery to happen. They don't want to remind us.* Asher believed it was better to *move on* and avoid dialogue and writing that explored racial injustices in class. The belief that race is inappropriate and offensive and therefore should not be discussed contributes to a process of silencing and invisibility of Black identities in school.

Blackness in School Is Only Historical

Black students have been marginalized and excluded in U.S. curriculum since the beginning of formal schooling (Au, Brown, & Calderón (2016)). Today, curriculum related to

Blackness and Black history is often framed in narrow contexts. Thus, it was not surprising to learn that Taylor, Asher, and Devin immediately brought up topics of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in connection to their experiences with writing about race in school. Devin and Asher spoke about popular historical leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks as figures they've learned about again and again over the years. Indeed, Devin profoundly asserted that there *there's not a lot of famous Black people doing things like standing up for themselves. I mean it's still on the news but it's not as special as it was back then.* Devin's statement is telling. She highlighted the idea that students are not learning about present-day Black leaders and activists.

Taylor believed her skin color afforded her a different perspective of the world that effected how she viewed and wrote about critical topics. In this way, Taylor acknowledged that race is always part of her perspective and experience, and not simply historical. Unfortunately, most of Taylor's school writing on race was bound in curriculum related to slavery. Furthermore, writing about identity or issues that explored systems of equity and social injustice were mainly rooted in historical social studies content. It is necessary then to question what is learned about being Black when schooling experiences only position Blackness within a spectrum of slavery to civil rights. As Devin expressed, knowledge about the present-day issues surrounding the Black community go ignored and unaddressed, slowly rendering Black identities as invisible and silent or relegated to the past.

Race Is Unnecessary to Write or Talk About

Lastly, race was positioned by the students as a topic that did not fit into the schooling space. Students were more likely to discuss current events and issues of race at home. Asher shared, *when I'm speaking with my African-American friends, I can say "Black" around them.*

But I normally don't do it around others. Normally, I say African-American but mainly we don't talk about races. Zoe, too, saw no need to write or talk about race at school. *People in general don't really have like any reason to prove anything, because no one's judgmental. Similarly,* Devin stated, *my life is about the same as everyone else's. I feel fine.* Zoe and Devin's idea that race is not worth writing about if there are no issues or challenges surrounding it speaks to the previous sub-theme that race is bad or negative. Indeed, Devin in discussing race talk at school stated, *sometimes it can be a bad thing, but sometimes it's just a good thing. I don't think we should really talk about it every single day, but a friendly reminder every week or so*. In contrast to Zoe, Devin recognized the merit of bringing race into the classroom. Currently she felt, race was *stored in the back of* [the teachers'] *mind* and only brought up when a significant current event occurred. For Asher, Zoe, and Devin race was an odd and unnecessary topic to write about and discuss among peers in school. There was no basis for it.

This positioning of race as unnecessary is a form of silencing dialogue and understanding concerning Black students and their experience (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Lewis, 2001; Tatum, 1999; Williams, & Land, 2006). Teachers and schools partake in this silencing by creating an atmosphere where they distance themselves and their students from discussing race. It is important to note that this theme of Black identity enduring an active process of invisibility and silencing in *school*, stands in contrast with how students talk about race at *home*. For example, during the interviews, most of the students mentioned positive affirmations of Black identity. Taylor and Asher both recognized the Black church as a space where they felt a sense of connection and community, and they both expressed a sense of Black pride. Asher aptly stated that being a young Black boy *feels good because you can show other races that our race could be just as good as your race in engineering or reading. It just feels good.* Devin alluded to the

idea that facing racism made Black people *strong*. I highlight these moments because they illustrate ways in which the students countered the process of silencing and invisibility imposed on them through school and curriculum (Owens, 2016).

The four themes presented reflect commonalities across the participants' school writing experiences. Students embraced skill and genre-based discourses and cited these as a dominant part of their writing experience. Teachers avoided critical and sociopolitical issues leaving students with little opportunity to write about them. Furthermore, the school and education system as a whole contributes to a process of silencing and ignoring Black identities when they position race as a historical issue or one of controversy. In Chapter 6 I discuss further how these themes relate to my initial research questions as well as the implications for the field of education and its stakeholders.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Using Clandinin's (2013) narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I worked closely with Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin. As a researcher, I purposefully built a relationship with each participant that allowed us to enter into the narrative inquiry process together. I conducted four semi-structured interviews with each student over the course of five months. I also assisted each child in a book project; together we explored, discussed, and questioned their lived experiences with school writing as another layer inquiry outside of the interviews. We explored writing instruction, writing assignments, their views on race and diversity, socioeconomic status, quality of education, and a variety of factors that related to their school writing. I analyzed the data using a theoretical framework of critical race theory and sociocultural theory. I also included Ivanic's (2004) discourses of writing. The narrative methodology and theoretical framework allowed me to determine four themes among students' school writing experiences.

The themes from my findings enabled me to answer my initial research questions. While the individual narratives provide more in-depth and varied answers to each research question, collectively, each research question can be answered according to a common set of shared beliefs and experiences. Below I present a discussion of my findings in relation to my research questions, followed by implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Student Beliefs about School Writing

All students held beliefs that school writing was bound by technical writing skills and mastery of these skills was important to them. Technical writing skills that students learned early on in elementary writing such as spelling, punctuation, and handwriting remained critically

important to them as part of the writing process. Students included these technical skills in their holistic view of writing and their school writing experiences. This finding aligns with previous research from Cutler and Graham (2008) that showed 72% of teachers embrace a skills-based approach to writing instruction. Lambirth (2016) also found that mechanics resonate with students in school writing. Newkirk and Kittle (2013) argue that students' experience with technical skills in writing can have negative and long-lasting impacts.

Students beliefs about skills can be problematic because it can begin to inhibit students from writing if they feel restricted and anxious about the many rules to remember while composing (Rose, 1994). While these rules are important to communicate in different writing spaces, how students perceive the weight of these rules should also give pause to educators as they help build the foundations of elementary school writing. Technical skills, mechanics, rules, and guidelines are deeply engrained in students. Greater emphasis should be placed on ideas, flow, language, dialogue, feeling, and organization in early stages of writing development. Applying Ivanic's (2004) discourse theory, a skills discourse was prominent across all students. Although students had assignments where they were able to write creatively or move through the writing process, a skills discourse was most closely associated with school writing.

Students also believed that teachers avoided critical or sociopolitical topics in the classroom. This practice is widely supported and affirmed in education research (Castro Atwater, 2008; Hagerman, 2018; Lewis, 2001; Milner, 2012; Schoenfield, 1986). Students understood that bringing these topics into the classroom could invite chaos or offend their peers. This notion is problematic and serves as a tacit form of oppression within the education system. When teachers ignore critical and real-world issues that affect individuals and society, they limit students in their ability to think critically, analyze issues, problem solve, and use their voices as tools to

speak up and effect change. For marginalized students who exist within a marginalized space, whose learning is framed within a marginalizing curriculum, it is critical that they have access to tools for empowerment, civic engagement, and community agency. Sociopolitical writing serves this purpose. In this writing space children gain a sense of who they are and think through ways in which they can effect change. By minimizing the importance of sociopolitical writing and silencing critical dialogue and thought, teachers do little support to this skill set or sense of empowerment among students. In fact, teachers limit opportunities for empathy, compassion, and tolerance by teaching within the confines of academic standards and written curriculum.

As students expressed beliefs on teachers' avoidance of race and critical issues, a parallel belief arose. While students recognized their minimal opportunities for sociopolitical writing, they believed they would write and discuss sociopolitical topics more frequently when they were older. From my inquiry, as well as my past experience as an upper elementary teacher, fourth and fifth grade students are more than capable of writing about such topics in the present as opposed to waiting for an arbitrary age and grade where it is deemed appropriate by a teacher. As evidenced in the narrative constellations, students have more to say than teachers may recognize. They are thinking deeply about issues that teachers assume will be offensive, and they have opinions about real world issues that teachers ignore.

Teachers must be purposeful in creating a space for children to write on critical and sociopolitical topics. They cannot rely on the curriculum or standards to bring up such topics naturally. Rather, creating a space where children are safe to explore the world critically is an art to be practiced and handled with sensitivity and awareness (Muhammad, 2012). Additionally, teachers must be comfortable initiating topics of race, and other critical issues with students so they are encouraged to explore these issues through writing. Because racial dynamics are

inherently bound in teaching, teachers must be purposeful in identifying racism within the curriculum and their own teaching practices. They must center race within systems and structures that function as systemic forms of oppression for certain groups of students (Milner, 2010).

One way that teachers can incorporate sociopolitical writing is by seeking supplemental resources such as poetry, song lyrics, diverse texts, multicultural novels, and curriculum such as *Teaching for Tolerance* (tolerance.org). Like teachers, students should also be encouraged to examine their positions in the world and sites of privilege, access, or inequity and injustice. It is important that critical and sociopolitical issues are not viewed as an add-on approach to be taught in addition to or instead of the mandated curriculum. With an add-on approach, race is positioned as an optional, secondary point of discussion that seemingly makes no difference to the learner or the learning process. In other words, teachers may avoid race by embracing a color-blind ideology (Neville, 2000). Color-blindness in the classroom is dangerous because it gives teachers permission to avoid uncomfortable conversations and conflicting perspectives and opinions under the guise that they do not see racial differences among their students (Castro Atwater, 2008). Indeed, the American Psychological Association (1997) argues that color-blindness is harmful to inclusion and diversity efforts. Additionally, it helps teachers continue teaching stances and instructional decisions that help maintain the status quo (Castro Atwar, 2008). Rather than bringing in faux critical topics, or broaching race and sociopolitical issues inauthentically, critical topics can be woven purposefully and intentionally into teaching. This kind of writing instruction was exemplified in McCarthey's (2014) study where Jackson, a Black male teacher embraced a sociopolitical approach to teaching writing when his White female coworkers did not. Another way teachers can include sociopolitical writing is by embracing an antiracist, or race-conscious curriculum (Milner, 2012). These approaches also align with Giroux's (2011)

critical pedagogy. Teachers might ask themselves, “Who is included and who is left out?” “Whose stories are told and whose go untold?” “What message am I sending by ignoring the saliency of race?” Thus, teachers can mold school writing into powerful, critical writing experiences through reflection and intention.

Personal Experiences with School Writing

For all students in the study, school writing experiences were highly structured and defined by predetermined topics. Most often students’ writing occurred within two genres: non-fiction and argumentative, and students discussed the majority of their writing in these two ways. This emphasis reflects the shift in standards spurred by the development of the Common Core State Standards that recommend that 50% of elementary students’ writing and reading experiences be geared toward non-fiction texts (Coleman & Pimental, 2012).

Students seemed to accept that school writing would always involve writing in these two ways and that writing in any other way was a rare luxury in the classroom. Students began to create a binary between school writing and out-of-school writing. School writing meant structure, assigned topics, and teacher control, whereas out-of-school reflected choice, artistic passions, fun, and free writing. Students craved more choice and freedom in school writing. The division that exists can send negative messages to children about school writing (Brown, 2015). Educators should consider whether the firm control over genre, topic, and assignment is necessary to achieve the desired learning outcomes of the assignment.

It is also important to consider how the parameters teachers place on assignments might limit students’ critical thinking and creativity. While the students were doing a great deal of writing in school, it did not always reflect criticality, creativity, choice, self and cultural awareness, and the ability to move beyond the surface of the content. In this way, students were

restricted from writing to their fullest potential. These limitations matter for Black children because the absence of these experiences represent forms of academic barriers. The National Writing Commission (2004) asserts that complex writing skills such as the ability to think critically, creatively, and analytically are desirable skills for students entering college and careers. Thus, if such development as a writer is absent for Black students in school, school writing becomes a social justice issue.

Sociocultural Factors and School Writing Experiences

For these Black students, there was little affirmation of their identities in school writing. The way that race was positioned by school culture, teachers, curriculum, and standards sent messages to students that being Black is a bad thing to write or talk about. Students embraced the idea that everyone at their school was equal, or the same. However, all students also noticed race in their in-school and out-of-school experiences and activities. Each student noted the racial demographics of their school or classroom, and specifically the number of Black children in their class. Thus, there was a contradicting parallel between students' observations that everyone was the same, and students' heightened sense of awareness of being one of a few Black people in a space. On one hand students seemed to embrace the same color-blind approach that permeated their classrooms and schools, and on another identified race as a factor that uniquely shaped their experience. To counter the feeling of marginalization and isolation, two students distinctly identified the Black church as a space where they felt a level of comfort and a sense of connection. Three students included positive affirmations of Blackness and pride for their race and their culture. These sociocultural factors of community and culture frame what students learn and embrace about Blackness. Because students' experiences with, and opinions on Blackness were seen as unnecessary or offensive to bring up in school, their expressions of Blackness in

these ways can be considered acts of resistance situated in broader counter-narratives against sites of marginalization in school. Thus, there was a disconnect in how students perceived and positioned their Black identity in- versus out-of-school. Such a disconnect calls into question what students subconsciously learn about their race and identity in school.

Because the broader school system is not designed with students of color in mind, the marginalization and exclusion of Black children in school settings is a real and present issue. Black children receive messages that race is offensive, unnecessary to write about and discuss, or it is only a historical issue. The school systems' positioning of race in these ways reflect a process of silencing Black identity and rendering it invisible. For example, passive, noncritical thinking and dialogue, and few opportunities to affirm identity or practice sociopolitical writing in the classroom combine with a marginalized racial status in the U.S. This combination proffers the potential for a dangerous form of systemic oppression where students' voices become dismantled and silenced. In this way the education system actively disempowers Black children.

Furthermore, intersectionality is at work in this discussion because the class dynamics and income levels of each family afforded them access to affluent neighborhoods, high-performing public schools, and recreational activities. However, this lifestyle meant that children in the study were routinely one of a handful of Black children in many of their in-school and out-of-school experiences. While all students believed everyone was equal and felt that teachers, coaches, and peers treated students the same, some of them did question why there were not more Black upper middle-class families in their school and community spaces. This disparity reflects a historical period of enslavement of African-American people and the economic disparity and oppression they faced at the end of the 1800s. Historical disparity continues to have economic implications for today's Black families and income mobility.

Implications

The children in my study are the heart of the research. In my study I sought to listen to children's voices and embrace their position as a knowledge-holder over their lived experience with school writing. To achieve this goal, I applied a combination of theoretical and methodological frameworks that also privileged the individual and their stories. Below I describe the implications of such student-centered approaches and the practical implications for educators, parents, and policy-makers that stem from the research.

Theoretical

I used a combination of critical race theory (Bell 1992; 1995; Crenshaw 1988; 1995; Delgado, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998 & Solorzano, 1997; 1998) and sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991) as the theoretical framework undergirding my study. Critical race theory positions race as a site of exploration amid broader education systems to explore issues of injustice, oppression, access, power, and privilege in order to better understand individuals' experience and cultural knowledge. CRT supported my study because I was able to understand sites of inequity in the school writing experiences of the participants and where Black identity is silenced and made invisible. CRT can also be applied as a way to challenge dominant ideologies and spur social justice. By listening to and amplifying student voices, there is an opportunity to create awareness for educators and policy makers and effect social justice changes in the education system. These groups might begin to apply a critical race theory approach to the decision-making processes that happen at a local school or system-wide. Indeed, race should be examined as a factor as educators make decisions about hiring practices, zoning efforts, purchasing of writing curriculum, and developing education policies. Educators and policy makers who apply critical race theory begin their work with the premise that race is a

factor that has both tacit and explicit implications for all students. In that lens, educators and policy makers may strive toward social justice outcomes (Bell 1992, 1995; Crenshaw 1988, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano, 1997, 1998). The use of this theory indicates there is a need for deeper examination into racialized school experiences across all school settings, districts, and systems in the study as well as tools of support for classroom teachers.

Sociocultural theory of learning acknowledges the myriad of environmental and cultural factors at work in the learning and development process for individuals. It also explores how people mediate their own learning experiences. The use of sociocultural theory indicated that a variety of factors such as curriculum standards, teaching styles, peers, school setting, and parents related to students' school writing experience and shaped their beliefs about writing. However, sociocultural theory also allows for an examination how some of these elements function to silence and make invisible Black identities despite the privilege and access afforded to students by their class. The implications here point to students' heightened sense of awareness of minority status in school, classroom, neighborhood, and recreational spaces. Not only were the students marginalized in these physical spaces, but they were also marginalized in the curriculum and writing assignments. Theoretical implications for parents point to the importance of spaces where students feel comfortable and affirmed in their identity such as the Black church, music, or friend groups.

Methodological

I used a narrative inquiry methodology to highlight student voices. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry allows the researcher to explore the experiences and stories that resonate with people as a way to understand their own truths,

knowledge, and beliefs. The narrative approach also acknowledges the role of the researcher in the inquiry. By crafting the narrative constellations, I was able to step outside of the students' school writing experiences and situate them more broadly among other contexts such as race, the education system, and sites of injustice.

Practical

Black middle-class children across the U.S. attend a diverse range of school settings and live a variety of communities and neighborhoods. However, one thing that unites their common experiences is their identity as a Black student participating in a broader education system that is largely designed and controlled by White men in positions of power and privilege. There is inherently a disconnect for students of color as they journey through standards, curriculum, textbooks, and assessments that center on White-middle class as the norm.

From this study, educators and district level leadership may become more aware of how Black students in general experience this disconnect in the writing classroom, and how Black middle-class children may be overlooked by way of ignoring race and positioning it as offensive. The simple narrative of sameness and equality in school creates a false veil of diversity and inclusion that does not affirm the complexity of Black identities in school, but rather makes it a negative thing. With awareness of such hidden messaging, educators may be more intentional about fostering professional development for teachers on bias and how to foster dialogue and writing about race in a safe way for all students. Castro Atwater (2008) argues the need for teachers to purposefully engage in racial discourse. Some ways to enter this space include attending diversity trainings, examining their cultural world views, and examining the levels of support for diversity and inclusion efforts within their school. District level personnel may provide supplemental resources or create initiatives that invite critical and sociopolitical topics

into the classroom and into students' writing in an appropriate way. Most importantly, educators must recognize the centrality of race in their students' experiences and their own teaching approaches.

From the findings, parents may also take away the importance of talking about race with their children at home. Understanding how a process of silencing and invisibility occurs at school may encourage parents to discuss racial issues at home while also affirming who their children are as young Black girls and boys. Black upper middle-class parents can also have open-ended conversations about why there are not more Black upper middle-class children in their children's schooling and recreation spaces.

For education policy makers it is important to consider the need to prioritize standards of humanity that teach students about culture, identity, language, empathy, respect, and tolerance for difference. Kirkland (2016) argues that these skills should be taught in school similar to math, reading, and writing skills, and that students will be better people because of it. Moreover, when education policy begins to change, so will the curriculum materials that are published and widely-available. Curriculum writers should also take note of these research findings that indicate a need for innovative resources to aid teachers in bringing critical and sociopolitical topics into the classroom, as well creating a school space that affirms ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity.

Limitations

Limitations in my study are largely centered on the scope of the geographic area, as well as the duration of the research. My study amplifies the voices of four Black upper middle-class children who live in one geographic region, in three different communities, and attend three different public schools. Because the schools/neighborhoods are situated within these defined

areas, my study cannot shed light on the experiences of Black middle, or upper middle-class children who live in other urban/suburban areas within the state, the Southeast region, or the larger landscape of schools. However, it is important to note that through conversation and interviews, my inquiry reflects the rich and complex experiences of the four Black upper middle-class children in the study.

Secondly, the length of my study presents a limitation. Given personal time constraints, I collected and analyzed my data over the course of approximately one school semester, or five months. Spending more time with the children, and possibly observing their classrooms for an entire school year may contribute to additional or alternative findings.

Suggestions for Further Research

In reflecting on the findings of my study, there are three relevant areas to build upon. First, I would like to explore further the nuances of the middle-class spectrum among Black children and families. The families in this study are described as upper middle-class, but depending on varying perspectives may be relegated to middle-class or elevated to Black elite. There are opportunities to explore different degrees of middle-classness and identity. Secondly, I would like to return to the data I collected from the parent participants and more closely examine the role of the parent in shaping student experience. Without formally analyzing the data from the parent interviews, I drew several connections between the students' narratives and the interviews with their parents. As many students noted, their understandings of identity, race, and sociopolitical issues often stemmed from home as opposed to school. Lastly, because students embraced the belief that they were more likely to discuss critical and sociopolitical issues when they were older, further research could consider follow-up studies with students when they are in

middle and high school to examine when they might be offered the chance to delve into these topics at school.

Nuances of Class Spectrum

In creating parameters and qualifications for my study, the broad spectrum of middle-classness in America emerged as a factor to consider. While metrics like profession, education, and neighborhood are more easily defined, middle-class income levels are much more fluid. One challenge is that middle-class income levels are defined in different ways according to census data, economists, and individual opinion. The income level in different geographic locations in the United States also causes middle-class status to vary. For my study, I chose to use a combination of the baseline median annual income of the state in which participants lived ($56,000) and Reeves' (2017) assertion that middle-class Americans make approximately $112,000. From there, I decided that the parent participants needed to make at least two times that of the state median to qualify for the study. Thus, they would sync with Reeves' concept of a middle-class income. However, in prescreening potentials participants, most families identified their annual income between $168,000-$224,000, which was 3-4 times the state median. One family fell into a range of $224,000-$280,000. Each family still identified themselves as a Black middle-class family, but also embraced it as a fluid label recognizing that they could also be described as upper middle class.

Readers may not identify the families in the study as "upper middle-class." Geographic location, material consumption, access, privilege, values, income, social metrics, and personal experience work to shape an individual understanding of middle class. One can also consider the existence or lack of generational wealth within a family, a factor that I did not explore with the parents of the study. Thus, the idea that middle-classness exist on a spectrum is reinforced.

In this vein, I return to one of the original goals of my study – to distinguish the many schooling experiences possible for Black children. The combination of being both Black and middle class is a category that is often ignored in academic research and literature. Black middle-class children are not present in academic research in the same way that low-income or working-class Black children are. Therefore, I purposefully sought Black middle-class children and families who did not contend with the same economic challenges. It was important to me that readers of my study would distinguish the participants from lower-middle class or working-class families because I wanted to illuminate how the nuances of their class status shaped the students' experiences with school writing. Research suggests that studies that center on "Black-middle class" families, are more widely considered lower-middle class according to a variety of metrics (Lacy, 2007; Patillo, 2013). However, the children in my study were afforded a lifestyle that allowed access to a variety of resources, travel, recreation, affluent neighborhoods, high-performing schools, and well-educated parents. These experiences informed my decision to describe them as upper middle class. However, it is important to note that these students attended public schools, rather than private and had parents who worked full time jobs.

To further my research, I might focus on families and children who occupy different parts of the middle-class spectrum. For instance, I eliminated three families during the pre-screening process because they did not live in the neighborhoods zoned for the public school their children attended. While these families were considered middle class according to other metrics, I wanted more narrow parameters for my study to ensure similar experiences across all metrics. In the future, I could also focus on Black middle-class families whose income is closer to $112,000. It would be interesting to know how their neighborhood/community experience and other sociocultural factors might shape different school writing experiences for students.

Parent Role

During the data collection process, I conducted one interview with the students' parents. I wanted to understand how the parents spoke about race at home with their children, what they believed about their children's writing instruction, and how they supported their children in school writing. This line of research would contribute to existing research that focuses on Black middle-class parents and their experiences in their child's education (Vincent, Ball, Rollock, Gillborn, 2013; Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2013). However, I ultimately decided to focus solely on the students. Although students' writing experiences included a network of parents, teachers, and peers, it was important to me to feature the student voices in a way that stood alone. Thus, I did not include the parent interviews in the narrative constellations, or my data analysis. In the future, I may analyze the student data in conjunction with their parent interviews to learn what additional patterns or new themes may develop. It is also possible that the data collected from the parents may only contribute as far as contextual evidence (Zoss, Smagorinsky, & O'Donnell-Allen, 2007) and affirmation to the students' experiences.

Middle School Writing

One prevalent theme in the findings was students' belief that sociopolitical writing is reserved for the past or the future, but not the present. Many students held the belief that they would naturally engage more in sociopolitical writing later in the school year, or in older grades. Therefore, further research should include a follow-up study with each student toward the end of middle school or the beginning of high school. Possible research questions might include: 1) What experiences with critical or sociopolitical writing do students have in middle school/high school? and 2) How do the elementary writing experiences compare to those of middle school?

By exploring the experiences of Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin further, educators may better understand the importance of sociopolitical writing in the elementary school years.

Final Thoughts

The stories of Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin were powerful and inspirational for me. Many times, I found myself in awe of their insightfulness and their ability to communicate such profound understandings of their experience. I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated in an inquiry with four bright and reflective students who helped me learn much about myself, my work, and my perspective on school writing for students of color. Certainly, their stories have become part of my own. It is my hope that our work together also remains a part of their story as well; that they will revisit how they understand, participate in, and challenge their school writing experiences going forward as students of color.

Young Black and girls and boys have much to offer this world. For me, writing is an element of their magic. Writing is where students should see their identity reflected. It is a safe space to learn and explore. It is where the whisperings of a critical voice begin to take shape. Writing enables students to recognize their power and use it to effect change in the world. From the narrative constellations, it is obvious that school writing experiences are where students craft much of their beliefs and understandings about writing. Thus, school writing must be transformed into a site of learning and inspiration: a well that students can return to again and again and to draw from and pour into. For students of color negotiating a schooling system where they are marginalized in textbooks, novels, curriculum, standards, and assessment, it is imperative that students learn to write their way into these spaces. As a woman of color in a space of academia, I must tell myself the same thing.

However, this feat is not something students should be expected to go at alone. Educators and parents are the "boots on the ground" who have the ability to invite, encourage, support, and guide students toward critical thinking and sociopolitical writing. While socioeconomic status may level the playing the field in many respects for Black middle-class children, educators must be highly vigilant and cognizant of how race remains a critical part of identities that permeate their school experiences, and should indeed be included in school writing experiences. Infusing culturally relevant teaching practices and embracing a culturally responsive pedagogy are some ways to create a more inclusive writing space in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Whitney, 2005). For parents who spend time at home discussing race and critical issues with their children, they may help instill a sense of justice, pride, and agency in their children. Educators and parents can help students embrace writing as a tool for change and empowerment even when education policy and curriculum standards do not. Perhaps in these efforts, pathways will be created for those same children to grow up and introduce their own education policies and create equitable writing curriculum.

One goal of my study was to pay homage to students by honoring their voice. Thus, every aspect of my study was designed with children in mind. In this way, my study embraced a humanizing approach (Paris and Winn, 2014) and an ethic of care (Noddings, 1993) that valued and affirmed children for who they are and what they have to say. It is my hope that the field of education will embrace more research that values the experiences and perspectives of children. The stories of Black middle-class children like Taylor, Asher, Zoe, and Devin stand on their merit, and I am grateful that I am positioned to help share their stories with many.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Semi-structured interview/Bank of Interview Questions
July: Getting-to-Know-You Interview

1. Tell me about yourself.
    a. What is something I should know about you?
2. What do you like you to do when you're not in school?
3. What do you usually do when you get out of school?
4. Tell me a little about your friends.
5. Who are your best friends?
6. How would your friends describe you?
7. How are you and your friends alike or different?
8. What's your favorite part of school? Why?
9. How do you feel about school writing?
    a. homework?
    b. projects?
    c. essays/reports?
10. Are you involved in any activities or sports in or out of school? Tell me about those.
11. What was your teacher like last year?
12. On a scale of 1-10, rate your teacher from last year. Why do you give them this score?
13. How would you describe your school for someone that doesn't know anything about it?
14. Did your teacher do a good job of teaching you writing? Why?
15. What did you learn about writing last year?
16. Does race make a difference in your school? Do you notice any difference between Black families/students and the White families/students at your school?
17. Does your family go to any school events? Tell me about some of those times. What was one of your favorites?
18. Do you think lots of families in your school participate in school events? What kind of families participate?
19. What are you looking forward to about this school year?
20. What are the cool things about your school?
21. What are the things you don't like about your school?
22. Tell me about your neighborhood. Are there friends for you to play with? Do you go to the same school?
23. Does your family have conversations about race or being a Black family at home?
24. Do you ever discuss any of these topics with your friends at school?
    a. your teacher?
    b. your school writing?
25. Do you know where you want to go to college?
    a. Do you know where your parents went to college?
    b. On a scale of 1-10, how important will writing be for college?
26. What do you think is the most important school subject? Why?
27. If I were to peek into your classroom on a typical day, what would I see? What you be doing? How would you be acting?
28. Let's talk about your parents. Tell me about them.
    a. Who helps you with your homework and projects for school?
    b. How does that usually go?

    c. Who's better at helping you? Why?
29. On a scale of 1-10, how important is it for you to do well in school? Why?
30. On a scale of 1-10, how important is it to your parents? Why?
31. Do you have brothers or sisters? What are some things that you do together?
32. Are you reading any good books right now?
    a. What's one of your favorite books you read in class this year?
    b. How do you feel about reading in your spare time?
33. What about writing—do you ever write in your spare time for fun?
34. Tell me about something you wrote last school year that you thought was really cool. Why?
35. What was one of your favorite writing assignments from last school year? Why?
36. What was one of your least favorite writing assignments from last year? Why?
37. Is there a certain teacher you hope you get next year? Why?
38. How do you feel about in school writing?
39. What kind of writing do you enjoy? Why?
40. Is there something you would like to tell me about that I have not asked you yet?

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured interview/Bank of Interview Questions
August: Writing Interview 1

1. How's the school year going so far?
2. What's your teacher like?
3. What is your principal like?
4. Did you get in the class you wanted?
5. Tell me about your friends in the class.
6. Are your parents excited about your teacher? How do you know?
7. Has your teacher told you anything about what the writing in your class will look like this year?
8. How would you describe yourself as a writer?
9. What do you like you about writing in school? Why? What bothers you about writing in school? Why?
10. Is there a difference between the writing you do inside school, versus outside of school?
11. How do you feel when your teacher assigns you a writing activity in school?
12. What kinds of things have you written so far?
13. If you were a writing teacher, what kind of things would you have your students do? How would you teach it?
14. What kind of topics do you get to write about in school?
15. Do you get to write about/Do you want to write about…
    a. topics that are important to you?
    b. big topics that are in the news or important in the world?
    c. topics that your teacher doesn't pick out or assign to you?
    d. critical topics like race or Donald Trump?
16. When you need help with your writing, what do you do?
17. If I were to record a typical writing lesson in your class, what would I see?
    a. Teacher
    b. Students
    c. Assignments
    d. Structure of the lesson
18. What do you typically do during your writing time in class?
19. Do you do some kind of writing every day? How do you feel about that?
20. Is writing important to you? Why?
21. On a scale of 1-10, how good are you at writing? Why?
22. How do you know if someone in your class is a good writer?
23. How do you know if someone in your class is not a very good writer?
24. Do your parents/friends/teachers help you with your writing if you get stuck?
25. Does writing in school help you in anyway?
26. Will you do writers workshop in your classroom?
27. Is there something you would like to tell me about writing that I have not asked you yet?

APPENDIX C

Semi-structured interview/Bank of Interview Questions
October: Writing Interview 2

1. Tell me about your writing experiences the past few weeks/months.
2. Have there been any occasions where your parents/friends/teachers have helped you with your writing if you get stuck?
3. What kinds of things does your teacher want you to do when you complete a writing assignment?
4. What are some important things to remember when it comes to writing? Where did you learn these things?
5. What kind of topics have you written about so far in class?
6. What kind of writing assignments are you working on in your class right now?
7. What do you learn about yourself when you write in school?
8. Have you had to take any work on any school writing assignments at home?
9. What are some things your parents say about your writing assignments?
10. How much time does your teacher spend teaching you writing?
11. Is your teacher teaching you to be a better writer? Why? How so?
12. Do you feel like you have opportunities to write about whatever you want to in school? Why or why not?
13. Will you need to be a good writer when you get older? Why?
14. How will you become a good writer?
15. Can you help change the world through writing? How?
16. What do you typically do during your writing time in class?
17. Do you do some kind of writing every day? How do you feel about that?
18. Is writing important to you? Why?
19. On a scale of 1-10, how good are you at writing? Why? How do you know?
20. If you were going to teach a new $4^{th}/5^{th}$ grader some basic tips about writing, what would you share with them?
21. Should children get to talk about whatever they want in their writing? Why or why not?
22. When you are learning writing in your class, what will this prepare you for?
23. Have you talked about or written about any big, serious, topics so far in your classroom? What are some examples?
24. Are you doing writer's workshop in your classroom?
25. When you think about the writing lessons, assignments, or writing overall,
    a. what has been a special moment for you?
    b. What has been a moment where you felt bad or uncomfortable?
26. When you think about school writing, what comes to mind? How do you feel?
27. Do you think your teacher treats everyone in classroom the same when they are teaching writing? Why?
28. Does your teacher treat you the same as everyone when they are teaching writing?
29. Is there something you would like to tell me about writing that I have not asked you yet?

APPENDIX D

Semi-structured interview/Bank of Interview Questions
December: Writing Interview 3

1. Tell me about your writing experiences the last few weeks/months.
2. You have been in 4th/5th grade for half of a school year! What have you learned about writing?
3. How do you feel about school writing?
4. What writing assignments/essays/projects have you been working on since our last interview?
5. Have you had work on any school writing assignments at home?
6. What are some things your parents say about your writing assignments?
7. How much time does your teacher spend teaching you writing?
8. What is something that your family talks about at home, that you have been able to talk about or write about in school?
9. What have you learned about yourself this semester?
10. Has the writing that you've done in school changed you in anyway? How so?
11. What do you think of the writing you do in school?
12. What's a moment that has stood out to you recently in your writing experiences in school?
13. Does your teacher ever bring up big, serious issues to talk about in class? (Examples: race, diversity, President Trump, poverty, local community issues, big issues on the news?)
    a. Do you get to write about these things, or share your opinion on these topics?
    b. Can you share any examples?
14. How important is it to be a good writer in school? Why?
15. Do you think writing is a big deal at your school? Why?
16. Does being a Black student in your classroom make a difference in writing?
17. When you need help with your writing, what do you do?
    a. Do you always get the help you need?
18. Are you able to help your friends with their writing? Can you give any examples?
19. What kinds of things have you learned about writing in school?
20. Are there opportunities for you to share your true opinions and beliefs in school writing? Why or why not?
21. If you were going to teach a new 4th/5th grader some basic tips about writing, what would you share with them?
22. Is there something you would like to tell me about writing that I have not asked you yet?

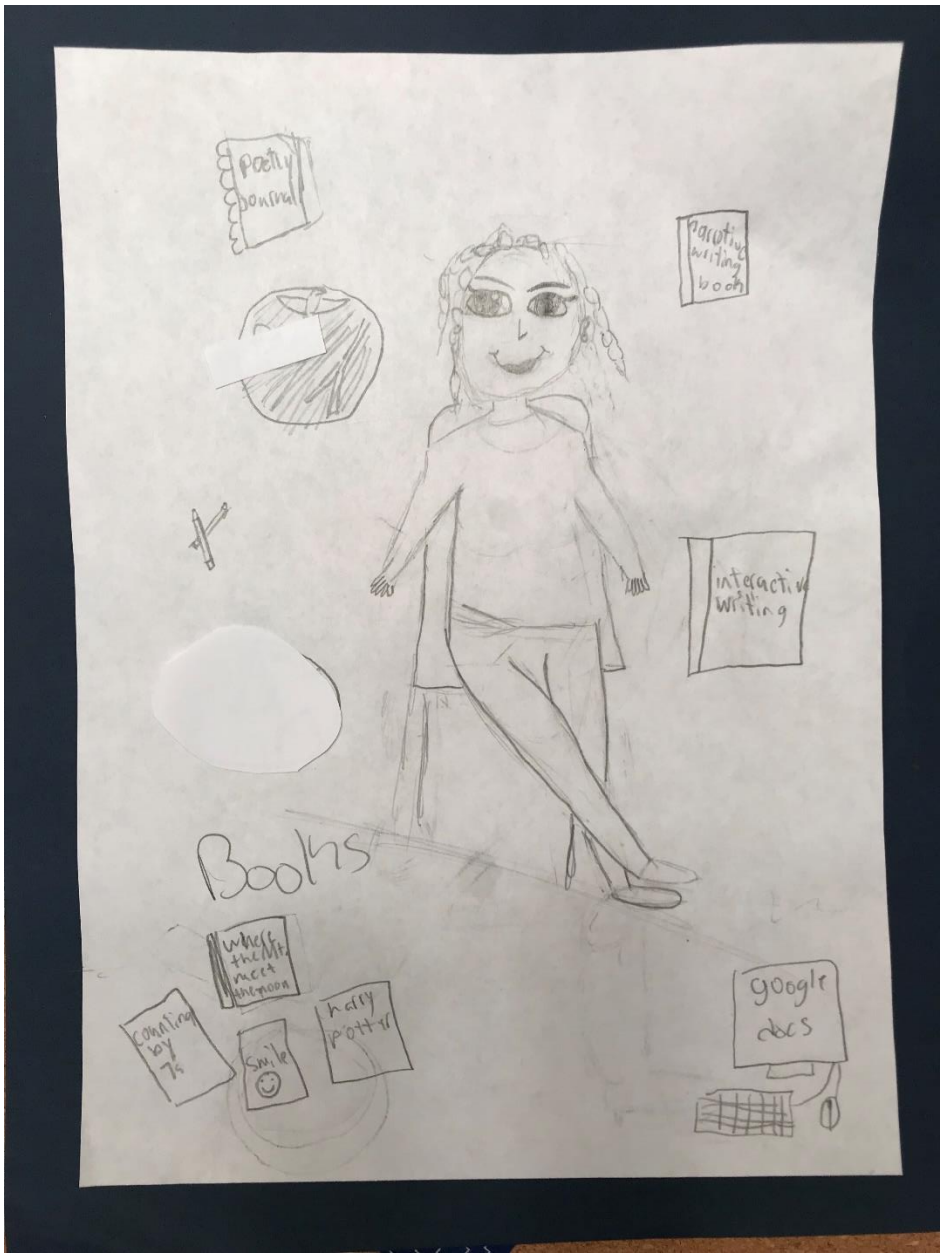
APPENDIX E

Semi-structured interview/Bank of Interview Questions
October: Parent Interview

1. Tell me about your son/daughter.
2. How would you describe them as a student?
3. What are your hopes/goals for them as writers this school year? Broadly?
4. How did you feel about the quality of the writing instruction they received last year?
    a. What did the teacher get right?
    b. What do you wish there were more/less of?
5. How did your son/daughter respond to the writing instruction last year?
6. How does your son/daughter feel about school writing?
7. Do they spend time writing for pleasure outside of school?
8. As a Black family, do you feel there was opportunity for your child to write about critical or political topics in the classroom?
9. Are there conversations had at home about race and being a Black family? Can you give me examples?
    a. Do you ever see remnants of these conversations in your child's writing?
10. How do you perceive your child's experiences with school writing?
    a. What kind of things does your child say when they bring home a writing assignment?
    b. How do they respond to accomplishing the task?
    c. How do you support them?
    d. Which parent tends to help more?
11. What kind of things are important to you in terms of in-school or academic writing?
12. Do you think the teacher should introduce opportunities for children to write about critical topics such as race, poverty, the President?
    a. Has your child ever expressed a desire to write about these things in school or out of school?
13. What has your child learned about themselves as a result of their school writing experiences thus far?
14. What do you think are the hallmarks of a good writer?
15. Tell me about a special or memorable moment with your son/daughter's writing recently.
16. Tell me about a recent moment where your son/daughter was upset or felt bad in relation to school writing.
17. What factors do you believe have been most influential in how your son/daughter understands or perceives school writing?
18. How does race/class factor into your child's school?
    a. Your child's schooling experience overall?
19. Overall, do you think your child feels confident about in-school, or academic writing? Why?
20. Do you think they hold a negative or positive attitude toward school writing? Why? Can you some examples?
21. Is there something you would like to tell me about your child and/or writing that I have not asked you yet?

Appendix F

Samples of Student Writing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Books
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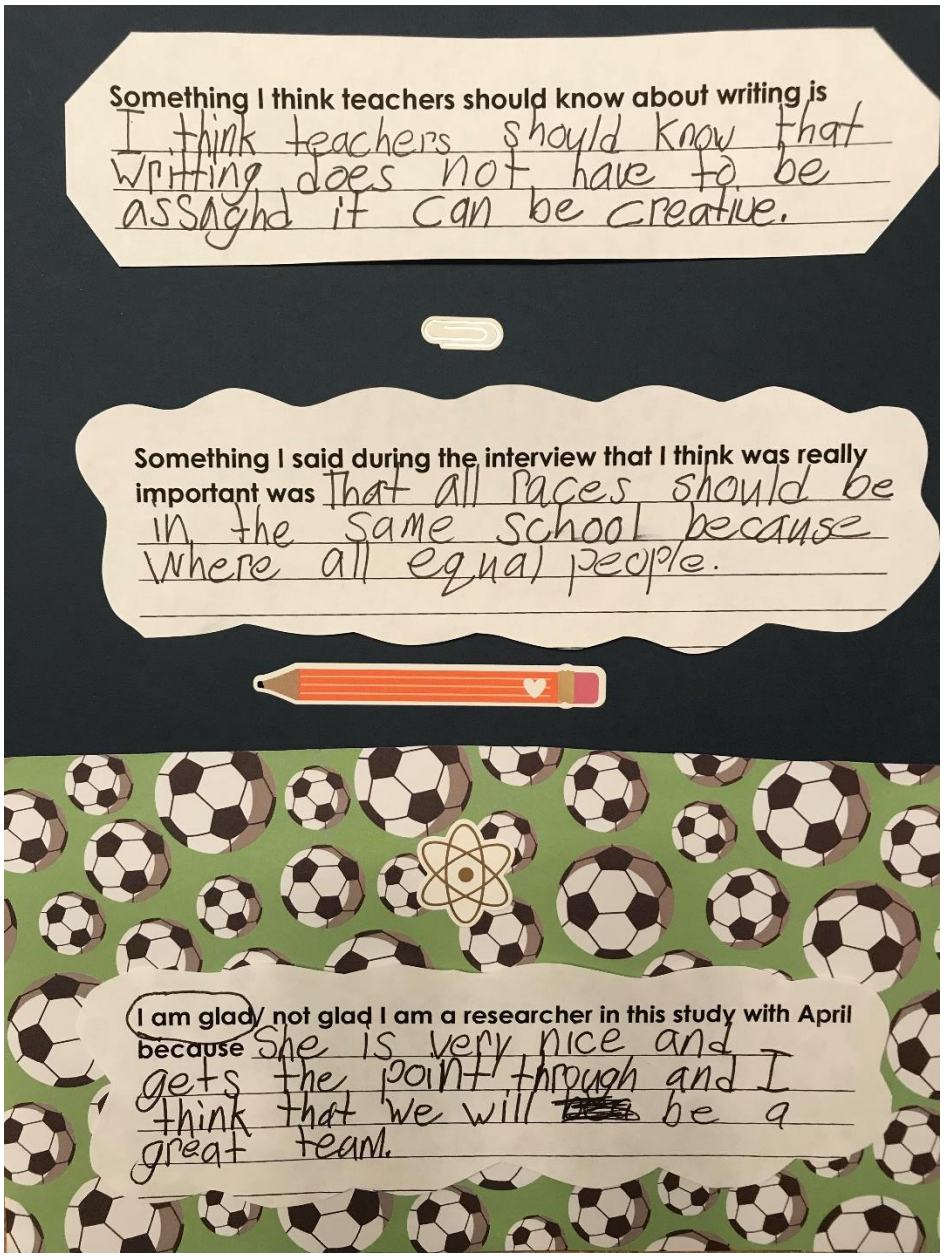
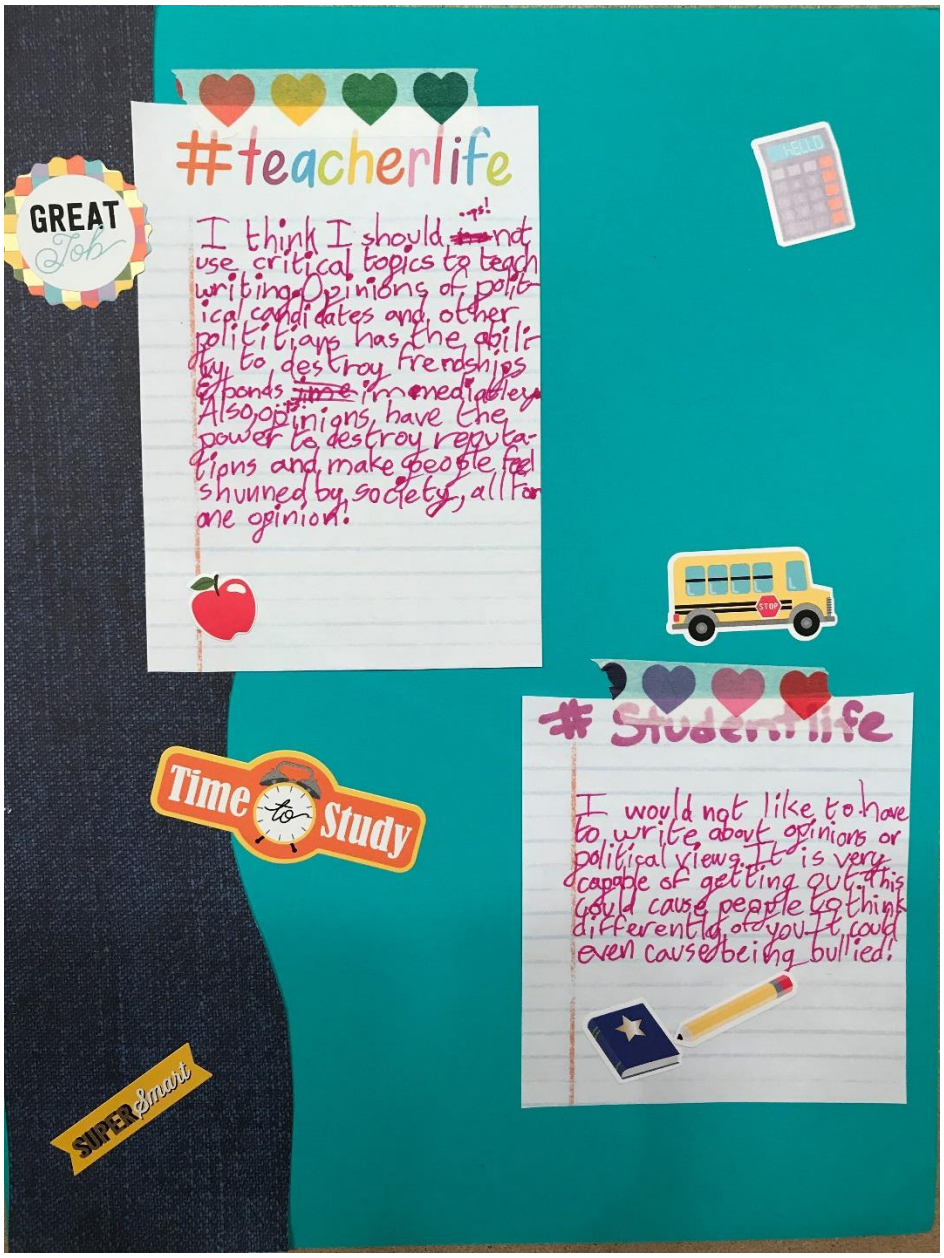
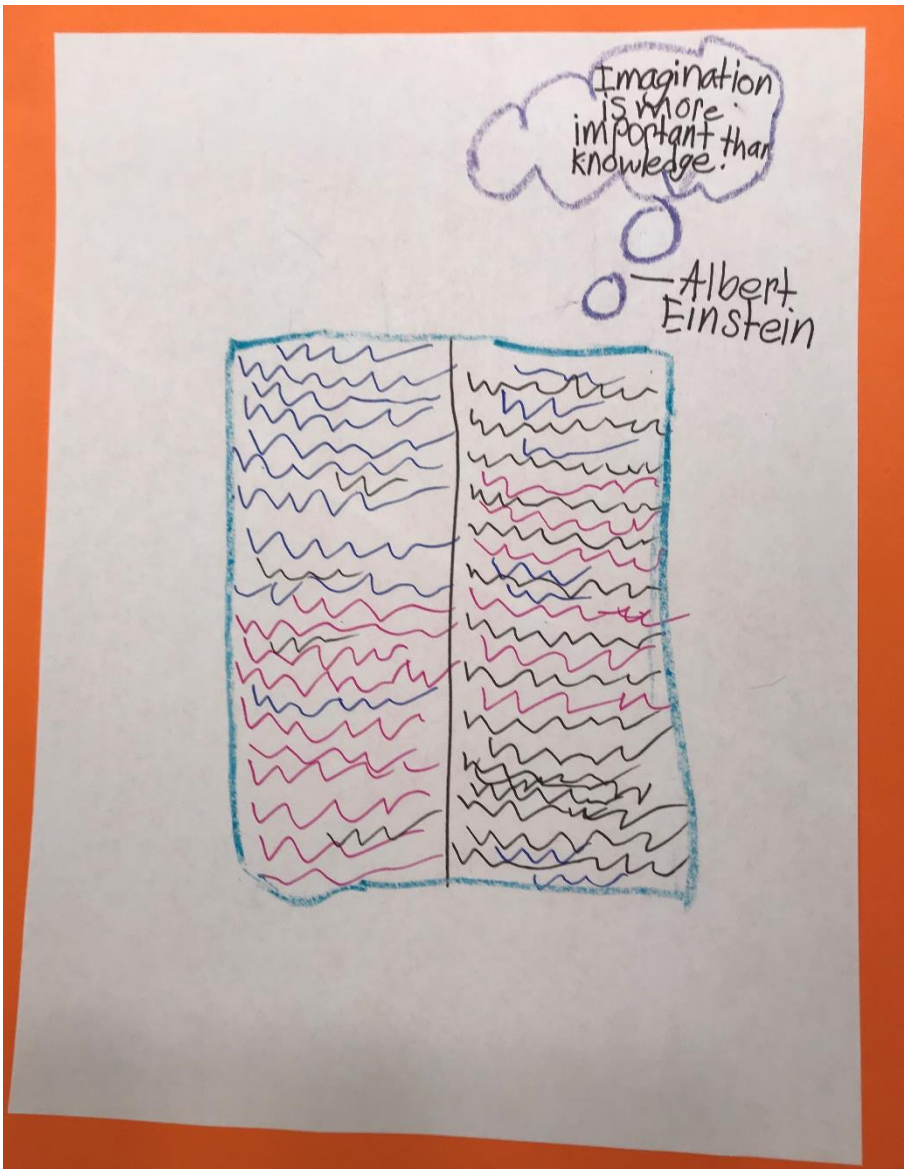
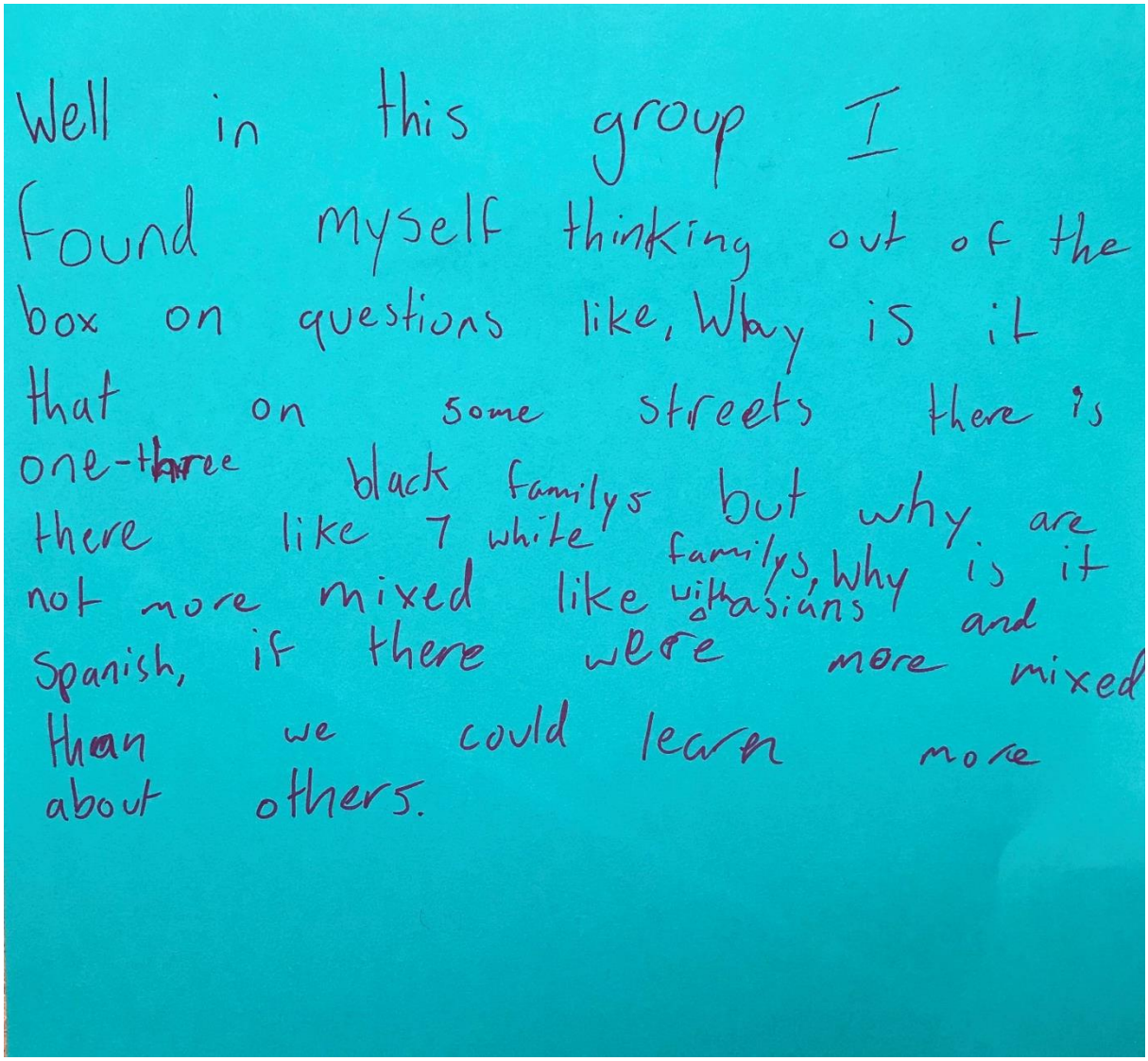

Something I think teachers should know about writing is
I think teachers should know that writting does not have to be assaghd it can be creative.
Something I said during the interview that I think was really important was That all paces should be in the same school because where all equal people.
I am glad/ not glad I am a researcher in this study with April because She is very nice and gets the point through and I think that we will be a great team.


#teacherlife
I think I should not use critical topics to teach writing. Opinions of political candidates and other politicians has the ability to destroy friendships & bonds immediately. Also, opinions have the power to destroy reputations and make people feel shunned by society, all for one opinion!
GREAT Job
Time to Study
SUPER smart
#Student life
I would not like to have to write about opinions or political views. It is very capable of getting out of this could cause people to think differently of you. It could even cause being bullied!


Imagination is more important than knowledge!
Albert Einstein


Well in this group I found myself thinking out of the box on questions like, Why is it that on some streets there is one-three black familys but why are there like 7 white familys, Why is it not more mixed like with asians and Spanish, if there were more mixed than we could learn more about others.